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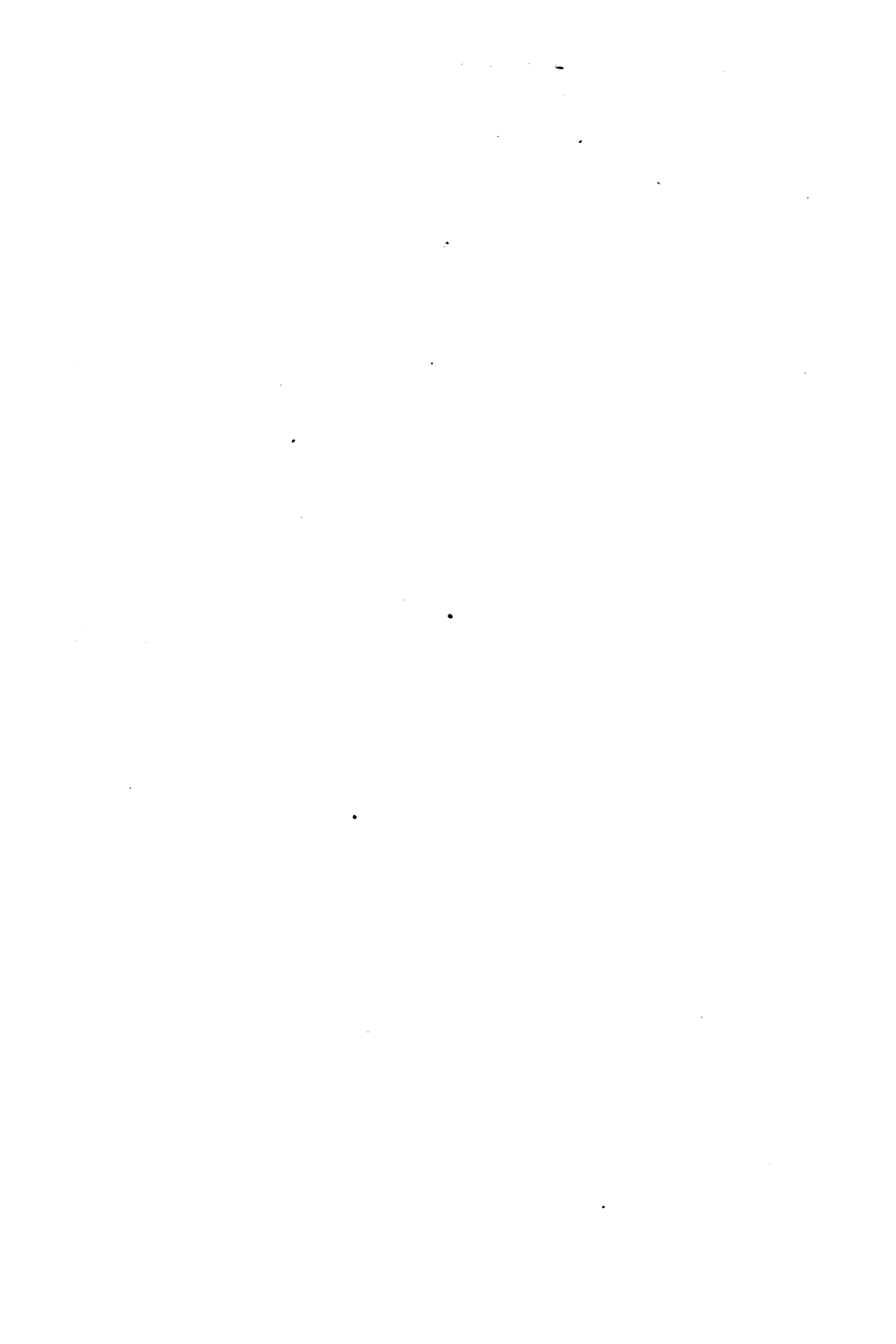
AN ARMY WIFE



• • • BY • • •
BRIGADIER GENERAL
CHARLES KING
• U.S.A. •



"She seemed to be the object of general interest."



AN ARMY WIFE.

BY

CAPT. CHARLES KING, U. S. A.

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PUBLISHERS.

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AN ARMY WIFE.

CHAPTER I.

THERE was more than one reason why Fanny McLane should not have accepted the Graftons' invitation to visit them at Fort Sedgwick. Perhaps that was why she never mentioned the matter to her sister, Mrs. Parry, until that lady surprised her in the midst of the packing.

"*Where* are you going, Fan?" was the query, half-aggrieved, half-aggressive,—the tone in which an elder often addresses a younger sister who has evidently presumed to contemplate some journey without previous consultation and consent.

"I? Why, I thought you knew. Going to spend a week or two with the Graftons."

"The Graftons! Fanny McLane! You don't mean you're going to Fort Sedgwick?"

AN ARMY WIFE.

"That's their station," answered Mrs. McLane, with slight access of color.

Mrs. Parry had not yet seated herself. She was still standing at the open doorway, glancing quickly from trunk to trunk in the sunshiny but littered room. Now she took a step forward, hesitated one moment as she looked at the maid-servant bending busily over a great Saratoga, and in dumb show intimated to her sister that she wished that open-eyed, open-eared domestic elsewhere.

But Mrs. McLane was blind to any signals. Indeed she seemed at the moment to find it necessary to supervise some of Annette's work, noting which symptom Mrs. Parry's scruples vanished.

"Fanny, you know perfectly well that's the last place on earth you should go to now, and Mr McLane not a year in his grave!"

A redder spot burns in each fair cheek, as the young widow turns quickly and faces her accuser.

"And why not, pray? The Graftons are the oldest, dearest friends I have,—at least *she is.*"

"And Randy Merriam—*isn't there*, I suppose—nor his plain wife?"

"Mr. Merriam's whereabouts is a matter of entire indifference to me, as you ought to have the decency to know, Charlotte."

"*Ought* to be matters of indifference, I concede, but I have grave doubts as to whether they are, as you say."

"Then keep your doubts and suspicions to yourself, Charlotte," said Mrs. McLane, with brimming eyes and burning cheeks. "This is no place to speak of such matters," and the brimming eyes—which their owner tries hard to induce to blaze instead of brim—turn significantly toward Annette, busily packing and assiduously feigning unconsciousness, and then almost defiantly turn back to her sister.

"I know perfectly well what you mean, Frances," responds the elder, and when "Charlotte" and "Frances" were adopted instead of "Lot" and "Fan" it meant that the sororal relations were more than strained.

"I gave you every signal ingenuity could suggest, but you wouldn't see. You didn't want to see, because you thought that"—and

here Mrs. Parry indicates the kneeling Annette with a nod of her very stylish coifed head—"that would keep me from speaking. But this is a case where duty cannot be neglected. Fanny, are you in your right senses?"

"In every one of the seven, Charlotte, and I don't mean to listen to abuse. You know perfectly well Dr. Mellon said I needed change."

"Well, then, go to New Orleans, go to Bermuda, go to St. Augustine—go to St. Peetersburg, Fan—anywhere on earth rather than Fort Sedgwick—anywhere under heaven except where Randolph Merriam happens to be—unless you would have me believe you lost to——"

But here, with solemn mien enters the male biped who officiates as butler hall boy, and major domo at the Claredon Flats—a card upon the salver in his pudgy hand, and Mrs. Parry nearly chokes in the necessity for sudden stop.

"Ask Mr. Swinburne up," said Mrs. McLane promptly, barely glancing at the black-bordered card and evidently glad of the inter-

ruption. "Now, Charlotte, not another word unless you wish me to show how indignant I am to every visitor who comes in," and Mrs. McLane is busy bathing her flushed cheeks already. "How does my hair look?" she adds, turning inquiringly toward the defeated elder, sure that whatever cause of quarrel there may be, that, at least, is subject for truce.

"Your hair is all right," responds her sister,

Mr. Parry's office," she says to her coachman as she enters the waiting carriage, and is whirled rapidly away down the avenue, past the dancing waters of the lake.

"Ned," she cries, twenty minutes later, as she precipitates herself into Mr. Parry's ground-glass citadel at the rear of the big office, "what am I to do? Fan is actually packed and ready to start for Fort Sedgwick—where Mr. Merriam is stationed!"

Ned turns slowly toward her, trying not to show in his deep-brown eyes how pleased he is at the sight of his handsome helpmeet. "The first thing you have to do, Mrs. Parry, when you come to this office for advice is to pay the customary retaining fee," he responds, as he takes her carefully gloved hand in his

just as the little electric indicator tells that the elevator has stopped and that some one is at the entrance door. It is Swinburne, a well-preserved, mutton-chop whiskered, carefully groomed fellow of forty-five, and Swinburne bows delightedly over the slender white hand of the pretty and youthful widow and disappears with her within the cosy parlor.

"How long has Mrs. McLane been packing?" asks Mrs. Parry, presently, of the maid.

"How long, mum? Oh, two or three days only, though we got down the trunks, mum, on Wednesday last," is Annette's reply.

"Four trunks and four days' packing to spend a week or so at a frontier post," says Mrs. Parry to herself, with increasing wrath. Then turning, she sweeps through the hallway with the mien of an offended queen, passes the parlor door with barely a glance at the bright, cheery interior, lets herself out with a snap and a slam, and stands angrily tapping her daintily booted foot on the rug in front of the cage until the elevator noiselessly answers her signal and then lowers her to the mosaic pavement of the ground floor. "To

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"Your hair is all right," responds her sister, with marked emphasis and as marked a sense of baffled purpose. "I wish the rest of your head were as well balanced. You don't expect *me* to see Mr. Swinburne, I suppose?"

"Mr. Swinburne certainly doesn't expect to see *you*. He is coming mainly on business."

"You might far better listen to his business, as you call it, even this soon, than go near Randy Merriam."

"Charlotte, I will not listen to *you*. If you cannot stay here without insulting me with every other word, you would much better go home and stay home until you can speak—sensibly." And with this Mrs. McLane darts past her sister into the passageway, and so on to the parlor front of her suite of apartments,

just as the little electric indicator tells that the elevator has stopped and that some one is at the entrance door. It is Swinburne, a well-preserved, mutton-chop whiskered, carefully groomed fellow of forty-five, and Swinburne bows delightedly over the slender white hand of the pretty and youthful widow and disappears with her within the cosy parlor.

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"Is that the customary retaining fee, sir?" she asks demurely, forgetful for the moment of the portentous news she brings. "I heard you had quite a number of feminine clients."

"So many that my partners find it as difficult to straighten out their accounts as I do their stories. Pardon me, Mrs. Parry, did you say I was retained? If so," and the junior member of the distinguished firm of Graeme, Rayburn & Parry again bends downward toward the glowing face.

"You're absurd, Ned, if that's what you mean," replies Mrs. Parry, secretly delighted at the lover-like ways of her lord. "I've a mind not to pay—anything. You shouldn't charge members of the family."

"I don't," he answers reflectively, "in all cases. There's Aunt Mildred, for instance, and Aunt Charlotte and grandma, but you and Fan now—"

"Fan! Why should she k—consult you?"

"Why, do you know, Lot, I've never once asked her. She might select some other fellow in the firm and k—consult him."

"Ned, you're simply horrid now. I never did like you when you tried to be funny. You know I never interrupt you here unless I'm troubled about something, and you're just laughing at me instead of sympathizing," and

Mrs. Ned pretends to pull away her hands, but conspicuously fails.

"One of the first principles of my large and successful practice, Mrs. Parry, is to secure prepayment of the retaining fee in all cases where I have reason to believe the client will subsequently act contrary to my advice. When you have— Ah, that will have to do, I presume, though it came with a bad grace. And now you say Fan is going to Sedgwick?"

"Yes, and Randy Merriam's hardly been married a month longer than Mr. McLane's been dead."

"Astounding coincidence! But Brandy is married, isn't he?"

"Randy, Ned, not Brandy—how your mind runs to such things!"

"Well, toward five P.M. the firm does feel like running to such things, my best beloved, and is only deterred from doing so by the fact that a touch of the button makes *it* do the running. What shall I order for you?" And Mr. Parry transfers her left hand to its mate reposing in his left, and stretches forth the right toward his desk

"I want nothing," she answered, "but advice, and no more nonsense. Ned," appealingly, "what ought I to do? What can I do?"

"Are you sure you can do just what I tell you, Lot?" he asks, a fond light playing in his eyes, despite the half-teasing smile.

"Of course I can. Don't I—always?"

"Well—ahem—I have known instances—But you *will* do just what I say?"

"Yes, Ned, I will."

"Then, your ladyship, let her go and don't worry. I don't, I haven't, a bit."

"Why, then you have known she was going—she has told you?"

"*She* hasn't. I learned it from Swinburne."

"When?"

"Three days ago."

"And you never told me, Ned!" reproachfully.

"Fact!" says Ned, sagely and sententiously. "You would have protested. She would have been the more obstinately determined. There would have been a row, and all to no purpose. Fan has had her own way since she cut her first baby tooth, and there's nothing on earth

so independent as a well-to-do young widow. Swinburne's found that out."

"Ned, I can't bear Swinburne, but I'd rather she'd marry him—as soon as it's decent to marry anybody—than go out there and fling herself in Randy Merriam's way again. Everybody knows the story."

"Yes. It *was* rather a public exhibition of mitten-giving, I'll admit," says Parry reflectively, "and not two years ago either," he added. Then suddenly—"Lot, what sort of fellow is Captain Grafton?"

"A very dignified, majestic personage—a good deal older than she is, you know, but she's devoted to him and he to her. *There's* a woman who doesn't do as she pleases, let me tell you! Captain Grafton will have no nonsense going on under his nose, and I'll tell Fan that if she thinks to resume her old flirtation with Merriam, she'll have to blind Grafton first."

"My love, you forget the compact. You're not to tell Fan anything except good-by. Yes—you may send our regards to Merriam by her. He's a particularly nice fellow, if she

did throw him over for old McLane and his fortune. And, Mrs. Parry, I shouldn't be surprised if our particularly pert and pretty sister were taught a very valuable lesson. Therefore do I say, let her go Gal—— I mean let her go. And, talking of going, suppose you drive me home with you. We'll stop and see Fan a minute—and Swinburne."

And stop they do, finding the broker-magnate still there, though in evident straits. Is it possible for a man in love to look pleased at the coming of visitors in the midst of even a prolonged *tête-à-tête*? Swinburne doesn't. He looks infinitely distressed, and Parry doesn't fail to remark it.

"Hullo, Swinburne! Who'd 'a' thought of seeing you here at this hour? I supposed you never missed a day like this for a drive, yet your team isn't at the door."

"No—er—I had business to discuss with Mrs. McLane before her start for the West—a journey which I had much hoped to hear Mrs. Parry had dissuaded her from taking."

"Oh, bless you, no!" responds Parry, cheerfully. "The doctor advises change of scene



"So!" says Parry."



and air, doesn't he, Fan? And Sedgwick's the very place for both. There's no scenery within ten miles of it, and there's more air than they know what to do with ten hours out of twelve. It blows a blizzard there six times a week, doesn't it, Fan?"

"Then I presume the residents of the post must be unusually charming to offset such monotony of landscape and such objectionable climate," says Swinburne stiffly, and looking ruefully at the fair young widow. "I have not the honor of anybody's acquaintance there," he adds.

"So?" says Parry. "Why, there's Captain and Mrs. Grafton, old friends of Fan's, you know—that is, Mrs. Grafton is, and there's Lieutenant Merriam—splendid fellow, that! We knew him so well when he was on duty at the Point. And there's Minturn, of the artillery, there with his battery. He used to visit us often when Merriam was philandering about Fan here. Oh, yes, there's a raft of pleasant people there."

Mrs. McLane's pretty face at this juncture is a study. She is flushed, almost tearful;

ready to pull Ned Parry's hair in her wrath, yet hardly able to restrain her merriment at sight of Swinburne, who sits in open-mouthed dismay. For downright mischief a brother-in-law has opportunities accorded no other mortal, and Parry is at once her torment and her delight. Mrs. McLane has been known to say that Charlotte took a very mean advantage of her in having met him first and "landed" him before he ever saw the sunshine of her own lovely blue eyes.

Very little alike were these two sisters, despite the fact that they had lived most of their life together. Educated abroad by a benevolent aunt after the death of their devoted mother, the girls had returned to America the great year of the Columbian *fêtes*, and Charlotte, the elder by two years, had met Ned Parry, a rising and successful lawyer, before they had been home a month, was engaged to him before the autumn leaves were falling,—before Fan even dreamed that anything of the kind was in contemplation, for she, at the moment, was having what she termed a simply deliriously delightful time at the Point.

Harriet Palmer, her especial friend at school both at home and abroad, had married Captain Grafton early that spring, Fan making almost her first appearance in society as one of the bridesmaids on that occasion, and being much impressed with the devotions of the groomsman assigned to her, a handsome, soldierly fellow by the name of Merriam. He was an officer several years the junior of Captain Grafton, but, being of the captain's regiment and conveniently stationed at West Point, he had been called into requisition with others of his cloth, and a very pretty wedding they had had. And then, as luck would have it, Grafton himself was offered a detail at the Academy, and rather than take his bride to the far frontier so soon after their marriage, he accepted it, and there they spent the summer; and there, in July, Miss Frances Hayward joined them at Mrs. Grafton's urgent request, and there did Mr. Randolph Merriam fall deeply and devotedly in love with her, and no one wondered. By far and away she was the prettiest girl at the Point that summer, and Merriam was conceded to be a mighty lucky

fellow when, very soon after the announcement of Charlotte Hayward's forthcoming marriage to Edward Parry, he allowed himself to be congratulated upon his engagement to her younger sister.

And he had every right to consider himself engaged. She had accepted his attentions, his devotions, eventually his ring and also his presents. He had called upon Aunt and Uncle Mellen in New York, the guardians of the girls, and startled them out of all equanimity by the announcement that Miss Hayward had accepted the offer of his heart and hand conditioned only on their consent, which he besought them to give.

"I own I never thought of her marrying in the army," said Aunt Charlotte, as do other aunts and mothers after their girls have been campaigning at the Point.

"What income, if any, have you outside your pay?" was Uncle Mellen's more-to-the-point interrogation.

"Nothing, sir."

"Well, neither has she. That is, what she has is so small it wouldn't keep that extra-

gant child in gloves. You two had better be sensible and think it over."

Randy Merriam did think it over, but all to no purpose. The more he thought, the more he declared himself hopelessly and irrevocably in love, and as Miss Fan took kindly to his protestations, and Parry and Charlotte took kindly to him and sympathized with the soldierly fellow, who was evidently much of a gentleman and so much in love, it resulted in his being made welcome at Parry's club, received quite as Parry was at the Mellens—since not oftener than once a week could he get away from his duties at the Point, and when Ned and Charlotte were married, as they were in state and style early in the winter, Merriam had many a good reason for believing that, despite his poverty, the next wedding reception held at the Mellens' beautiful home would be one in which he would be vitally interested.

Well, he was; but not in the way or manner expected. In fact, he did not attend the ceremony or the reception; indeed, he was not bidden. A very disagreeable thing hap-

pened to him within a month after the Parry-Hayward wedding, one that overwhelmed him with mortification and distress, and caused no little indignation among his comrades.

Everybody knew Randy Merriam was in debt. He made no secret of it. He was extravagant in his tastes, had incurred obligations before going on duty at the Point, and found it impossible to "catch up" there. There were three or four accounts he had been asked to settle, as they had been running some time, but he put them off from month to month, hoping that he might soon be able to obtain possession of a small sum of money left him by the will of a relative two years before. It was only a few thousand dollars, yet even that had been contested, together with a number of similar bequests, and the legal complications had been as exasperating as the law's delay could make them. One day, soon after Charlotte's wedding, Merriam was summoned to the presence of the superintendent and was regretfully told that four of his creditors had united in an appeal to the War Department, and the matter had been

referred to him as post commander. Merriam was confounded. He had seen and talked with one of them only a few weeks before, and no such action had even been hinted at. Nor did he know that any one of their number was aware of his indebtedness to the others. Frankly he had told Miss Fan of these matters before he told her of his love, but it made, apparently, no impression on her. "Let them wait," she said. "You'll soon be able to pay them ten times over." Frankly he had talked of it to one or two of his intimates, and later to Parry, who had grown to like him, and who, as a lawyer, thought his little inheritance could not be much longer withheld. It would free him; it would very prettily furnish their quarters and still leave a few hundreds to the fore. He remembered, too, that Uncle Mellen had made some inquiries of him, and that in perfect frankness he had replied. And now, just at the moment when he was full of hope and happiness, came this cruel mortification. Such action on the part of his creditors was unaccountable, but, as the superintendent said, it was a solemn fact. Deeply chagrined, he

told the colonel the whole story, and the colonel was full of sympathy, but as full of sense.

"I'm sorry, Merriam," said he, "but there's only one thing for you to do. There's no telling when you'll ever get that inheritance. When lawyers once get hold of an estate it's dollars to dimes nobody else ever does, and by the time judgment is awarded in your favor, it will be eaten up in fees and innumerable charges. You cannot count on a cent of it. You cannot save anything to speak of here. Just capitalize those debts of yours; borrow the money from some business man on reasonable time and interest, get your life insured in his favor, and go out and join your troop. We can have you relieved as at your own request, and once out on the frontier you can save so much a month, and little by little pull yourself out."

And leaving his pretty sweetheart, his chosen friends, and pleasant surroundings, this was exactly what Randy Merriam did. Ned Parry, with a puzzled look on his face, had listened to his mournful recital, had promptly offered his services and his bank account, and

made but one stipulation: "Don't you go near those fellows, Merriam. Let me have the bills and I'll send you the receipts," for Parry had a theory of his own.

Sedgwick was as dreary a post, so far as surroundings were concerned, as could be found in the West. It stood on a pebbly *mesa*, flat and barren, overlooking the narrow, tortuous, shallow cañon through which rippled the waters of the San Mateo. Across the western horizon hung a low, jagged curtain of distant blue mountains. Far away to the northwest a snow-peak shimmered in the dazzling sunshine, but north, east, and south the low rolling contour of the prairie, like the ground swell of the ocean, was lost in illimitable monotony. The only trees were some willows down in an arroyo that emptied its rivulet after a rain-storm into the stream. The only green things were the blinds and vines upon the piazas of the officers' quarters. Yet Sedgwick was a big post, an important post, for a great Indian reservation lay only twenty miles away toward the mountains. Two lines of railway met at the junction

three miles down stream, and by riding a few miles westward one came suddenly upon a fertile valley, where grass and trees abounded, and where all nature seemed to smile, and where by rights the old post should have been located; but all that was Indian reservation when Sedgwick was built, and not until long after did the territorial officials succeed in getting it lopped off from Lo's allotment and thrown open to settlement. Along the bowery shades of the Santa Clara were now ranches by the dozen, and a hundred or more of enterprising settlers, and between them and the thronging garrison at Sedgwick was peace and good will and every kindly relation, when Randy Merriam came out in the December of the Columbian year, determined to take his punishment like a man. He had sworn off cigars and extravagances of any and every kind. For a time he even declined to subscribe to the hops, which were charming affairs, for the band was excellent and the regiment blessed with many lovely and lovable women. "Merriam spends all his money in stamps," was the comment of the garrison

wits, for he wrote day after day to his distant darling in the East. That winter Ned Parry accepted the junior partnership in the great firm of Graeme & Rayburn in Chicago, and moved thither with his lovely wife, while Fan remained with Aunt and Uncle Mellen in Gotham, pining, presumably, for her far-away soldier boy, and yet writing much less frequently than he did, for the demands of society were incessant and auntie kept her "on the go."

One day in April there came a letter from the East at sight of which Randy Merriam's face was radiant with joy. It briefly told him that the long litigation was over and that some thirty-five hundred dollars, all that was left of the original six thousand, were at his disposal. Jubilantly, confidently then, he wrote to Fanny to name the day, and in course of time there came a reply, long, self-accusing, penitent, miserable, but all-sufficient. The day was named, and so was the man—Mr. John Harold McLane, of New York, a wealthy widower of fifty five.

CHAPTER II.

THE wedding of Miss Hayward and Mr. McLane followed so speedily the announcement of the engagement that elderly club men, long years the chums of the groom, barely had time to concoct suitable forms of compliment and congratulation. The reception which followed the ceremony, however, was on such a scale of magnificence as to leave little room for doubt that the Mellens had long been preparing for the event. The business relations existing for a decade between Uncle Mellen and John McLane were well understood. Indeed the match was declared to be of Uncle Mellen's making, and the whole transaction was openly referred to by younger club men as a most Mellencholly affair. Charlotte Parry went on from Chicago to attend it, but Ned, her devoted lord, pleading very pressing professional engagements, positively refused to go. He wrote a letter to Uncle



"Then turned away."

Mellen about that time, however, which gave other reasons for his non-attendance, and to which the recipient, after several attempts, found it impossible to reply. Mrs. Parry hastened back to Chicago immediately after the reception, and from that day neither she nor her husband set foot within the Mellens' doors. Aunt Charlotte declared the conduct of her niece most undutiful, ungrateful, unaccountable, but her husband said nothing.

The bride was a vision of girlish beauty, that bright June wedding day, and McLane was as handsome and well-preserved a fellow of fifty-five as even New York could show. He was evidently deeply in love and immeasurably proud and happy. As for the lady, she looked to the full as joyous and radiant as any lover lord could ask, and her manner toward McLane, much "more than twice her years"—nearly three times, in fact—was sweet, shy, appealing, and trusting, all in one. Many women in society, old and young, envied her, and everybody appropriately congratulated him and wished her joy. Mac's plan for the honeymoon included a yachting tour through

the Scottish Isles and so on to North Cape, but Fan surprised him. She had seen so much of Europe, she said, and so little of their own country. Couldn't they go to Chicago for the World's Fair, and then to Niagara and down the St. Lawrence, and through the White Mountains and the Catskills? So this they did, coming back to Gotham for a round of receptions and social gayeties in the late autumn, then going to Florida and thence to New Orleans for the Mardi Gras, and then Fan begged to be taken to Coronado and Monterey. She longed, she said, to see Southern California, and the "Sunset Route" bore them within three miles of old Fort Sedgwick on their westward way.

The Graftons were still at West Point. There was only one officer at the post whom she knew, and none who were known to her husband. It was five o'clock of a soft, sunshiny February afternoon, one of those matchless days for which the valley of the Rio Bravo is famous. McLane was playing "dummy" in the smoking-room. The young wife was yawning over a book. She was looking, it

must be owned, not only bored, but somewhat dusty and dishevelled, and she was conscious of the fact, which made her look still worse. She was remarking how baked and dry and dreary and monotonous was the landscape, and wondering where they were and what was the name of those far-away blue mountains under the fiery path of the sun—geography was not one of her strong points—when the train slackened speed and rolled slowly into a station that seemed more populous than any recently passed, and there stood another train, almost the counterpart of their own, and on the station platform of what was evidently a connecting road were groups of swarthy, cigarette-smoking Mexicans, a few stolid, silent Indians, and then—was it possible? stylishly, fashionably dressed women, and officers in riding garb, and there at the platform stood waiting ambulances and orderlies with led horses, and the sound of merry chat and laughter came floating in at the open window, and people occupying sections on the left side of the Pullman crossed over to her side, and gazed with all their eyes. “What’s the name

of this station?" some one asked the porter. "Santa Fé Junction," was the answer. "Yawnduh's Foht Sedgwick, three miles out there on the mesa."

Fanny McLane's heart gave a sudden jump. The train, which had stopped an instant before crossing the other track, moved slowly on, and then under the grip of the air-brakes came to a stand beside the platform, and, conscious that she was looking her worst—looking yellow, in fact—she drew back from the window and hastily lowered the shade. Then merry voices and laughter, and light, bounding footsteps were heard at the head of the car, and in came a joyous party, officers and ladies. A tall, slender girl seemed the object of general interest, and her bundles and wraps were deposited in the opposite section by one officer; another bore a brand-new bag, another a bunch of beautiful roses, and ten women hung about the girl and kissed her and cooed over her; and, with the experienced eye of her sex, Mrs. McLane needed only one glance at the pretty, stylish travelling suit, at the jaunty little hat, at the slender tapering

boot, all so new and glossy, to realize at once that here was a bride—an army bride—and one beloved of her kind, for one woman after another clung to her as they kissed, and many eyes were wet, and all were filled with love and trust and tenderness. “God bless you, Floy, darling!” cried one enthusiastic girl. “I’m so, so glad we’ve got you in our regiment. I was so afraid the Riflers would never let you go.” And this, too, seemed an all-pervading sentiment among the men whose caps were decorated with crossed sabres, while others, who wore the badge of the infantry, and their wives and daughters, seemed to have another song to sing. “Florence, you broke our hearts by marrying out of the regiment, but at least we’ll soon have you back at Sedgwick,” was the purport of what was said by more than one of their number.

Then came warnings to leave the train. The conductor was shouting “All aboard!” and, bearing her with them, they rushed tumultuously to the rear platform. Then, very slowly at first, the car began to move, and the other occupants of the Pullman poked their

heads out of the windows and looked back along the platform, as acclamations followed them. But Mrs. McLane still shrank behind the lowered shade, her heart beating strangely, and her ears straining as though to catch the tones of a voice long unheard, last heard only with sweet emotions. Manly tones were shouting Godspeeds and good-byes. Womanly voices were adding their inconsiderate pleas for letters, and then as the speed increased and the voices died away, the passengers slipped back to their sections and strove not to seem to be on the watch for the return of the bride. It was quite a little while before she reappeared. Mrs. McLane was conscious she was coming because of the backward glances of her fellow-travellers, and, under their long lashes, her own eyes took their eager, sidelong peep. She came slowly, a tall soldierly form in gray travelling garb close at her side, one arm half encircling, half supporting her. She had evidently been weeping a little, for as she seated herself and looked fondly up in his face the great lustrous, deep-brown eyes were wet with tears. but the face

was glorified by the love and trust that shone in them. A broad-shouldered back, bending devotedly over the girl, was about all Fanny McLane could see of the escort, but it was enough to cause her heart to stand suddenly still. She felt as though she were choking, as though she must have air. Then she heard his voice, deep-toned, manly, tender, the very tones her ears had been straining to hear a few minutes before, and then springing from her seat, her handkerchief raised to and shrouding her face, she too hurried to the rear door of the car and stood there clinging to the rail for support. The man in gray, the devoted bridegroom, was Randolph Merriam.

And there at the rear door she hovered until the clouds of choking dust drove her within. It was the men's end of the car, and fragrant cigar-smoke was drifting from the room in which her husband and his cronies were playing whist. If only the long car were turned end for end! If only she could get her bag and reach the women's toilet-room unobserved. Let him, and his—and that girl—see her looking as she was now?—not for worlds! Get to

that toilet-room and wash away the grime and dust and cinders, get out her alcohol lamp and curl that rebellious, stringy "front," and prink and powder and retouch those faded lashes and brows—all this she must do before facing him and her. But how to get there without being seen. She must pass them so close as almost to touch his shoulder. No! A furtive peep from behind the brown curtain into the dim interior revealed the broad gray shoulders bent far over to the girl's end of the seat. He was leaning over her, looking down into her eyes, talking earnestly to her. There was no comfort in the sight. It stung her to instant action. They were running swiftly down grade now, following the windings of the San Mateo, but she made a rush for her section, grabbed the handsome silver-mounted bag that lay just within reach, and with bowed head and bent form was hastening on, when the forward trucks struck a sharp curve, the big car gave a sudden lurch that tumbled her into the section directly in front of the blissful couple, and sprawled her ignominiously upon the front seat. The occupant of the other



McLan.

was a snoring commercial traveller. Her bag dropped in the crash, fell to the floor, and burst open, and before she could recover herself or its contents, the man in gray had sprung to her aid, had bundled an escaping scent-flask and other trifles back into the receptacle, shut its silver lips with a snap, and, bowing courteously, endeavored to restore it. Averting her face—covering it almost with her handkerchief—she strove to rise and go her way, but the car still swayed and swung. He put forth a helping hand to lift her to her feet, but she did not see it. Scrambling out, still hiding her face, she seized again her satchel, and, never looking, never speaking, hurried past him and disappeared at the forward end of the car, leaving Merriam gazing blankly, fixedly after her.

“Didn’t she speak to you at all?” asked the bride, a moment later, as Merriam, with a strange, dazed look on his face, returned to his seat by her side. “I’m afraid she’s dreadfully hurt, for her knee struck the seat-arm ever so hard.”

And still Merriam could not speak.

"What is it, Randy?" she whispered, after a moment's anxious study of his face. "You look so—unlike yourself."

With an effort he pulled himself together. "Did you see her face, Floy, dear? What was she like?"

"Why, she's a blond with—I only got a glimpse, Randy—she's a blond with light hair and blue eyes. She might be pretty. Why, dear?" And the dear came so timidly.

"I thought—I had seen her before, but it's impossible—absurd. Go on and tell me what Mrs. Grafton wrote you, sweetheart. Never mind the capsized blond just now."

But he himself could "mind" no one else when, half an hour later, there came tripping down the aisle from the ladies' toilet-room a slender, graceful, stylishly draped figure with such a radiantly pretty girl-woman face—a fair, sweet blond, with lovely curling hair, the brightest of big blue eyes, the rosiest of tiny mouths, with glimpses of snow-white teeth as she smilingly approached and, with infinite grace, held out a prettily gloved hand.

"To think that I should have been here in

time to tender my congratulations! Won't you present me to Mrs. Merriam?"

And Randolph Merriam, for once in his life, was utterly at a loss what to say or do. He could hardly speak. He could hardly breathe. "Floy," he finally said—and his tone was strange and cold, "this is Mrs. McLane, of New York, an old—acquaintance," then turned away as Mrs. McLane effusively, delightedly bent over that she might shake hands with the bride.

It was early evening—too early for twilight effects, yet the shadows were falling thick on Florence Merriam's wedding-day before the setting of the glowing sun.

CHAPTER III.

Two days after the receipt of the announcement of Fanny Hayward's engagement to Mr. McLane and a few weeks before the marriage, Randolph Merriam had left Fort Sedgwick in command of a detachment of cavalry escorting a government survey to the Mescalero Range. It was not his tour. The detail belonged to Harrison, a younger officer, who had been saving up all winter for a two months' leave and a chance to spend his savings at the great Exposition at Chicago. A relentless colonel would allow him no leave, because it was his turn for field duty, and because so many officers wished to go to the Fair that it was out of the question to expect any one to offer to take the detail for him. The detachment would be in the field at least three months, possibly four. Harrison, consequently, was the bluest man at Sedgwick, and said more hard things about government surveys, and more improper

things, than could well be recorded here. Everybody had been congratulating Merriam on the final receipt of what the lawyers didn't "scoop" of his little legacy, and for two weeks he had been as happy as Harrison was miserable. Then, to the utter amaze of everybody, just the day before it was time for the command to start, it was announced that Harrison's application for leave had gone forward approved, and that Merriam had asked for and been granted the luxury of a three or four months' jog through the roughest and most forbidding of mountain ranges. He had even got the colonel's permission to go ahead and wait for the detachment at the old Mission on the Santa Clara, and had started late at night, accompanied only by an orderly. People couldn't believe their ears, and the post commander rejoiced in the possession of a secret even his wife couldn't coax out of him—the conscienceless, crabbed old crank! as one of his garrison, not subject to court-martial, described him. The adjutant had to admit that Merriam had been closeted with the K. O. nearly half an hour, and had looked black and

blue both, but no blacker, no bluer, when he came out than when he went in. No, he did not think that anybody else had complained of Merriam's owing him money. He did not think anybody had had a word to say against him. The old man had simply sent for the adjutant right after the interview and remarked: "Mr. Blossom, you can tell Mr. Harrison he may submit that application for leave and I'll forward it approved. Mr. Merriam has my consent to take that escort in his stead." But hadn't he told anybody? Didn't anybody know? were the very natural questions asked. No. Merriam's one intimate and chum in his regiment was Bill Whittaker, and Bill was away up at Santa Fé at the time, a witness before a general court-martial. Merriam was a frequent visitor at the Haynes' quarters, and everybody knew that in his own regiment he had no warmer friends than Captain and Mrs. Lawrence Hayne, of the Riflers, and Merriam had had a long talk with Hayne before calling on the colonel. But no one who knew either Hayne or his charming wife ever thought of trying to extract from them

information as to other people's personal affairs. Old Buxton, the dragoon-of-the-old-army-sort of a lieutenant-colonel, did try to pump the captain, but was most coolly and civilly snubbed for his pains. Buxton was a man Hayne never spoke to except in the most formal way. There had been some trouble between them ever so long ago, when Hayne was a young second lieutenant and "Bux" the senior captain of the —th Cavalry. The softening touch of time had effaced much of the bitterness of that old, old story. Hayne had twice been stationed at the same garrison with Buxton, and found it awkward to preserve the rule of non-intercourse with a field officer who was frequently in command, so he spoke respectfully and courteously to his senior whenever they met, but the courtesy was as cold and the meetings as rare as he could make them. Bux, however, "bore no malice," as he said, and was quite ready to be magnanimous and forgive Hayne for what had transpired in the past, but then Buxton, not Hayne, had been the offender. Indeed, Buxton was a pachyderm on whom snubs had little effect

He believed Hayne knew why Merriam had asked for his most undesirable detail, and so importuned him with eager inquiry—all to no purpose. Harrison blissfully went in to Chicago and Merriam out to the Mescalero, and was no more heard of or from for several weeks. Then the news came that he was seriously ill with mountain fever at the cantonment on Catamount Creek, and Bill Whittaker was hurried thither to take over the command.

In a week there came a letter from him to Captain Hayne, and this was what it said:

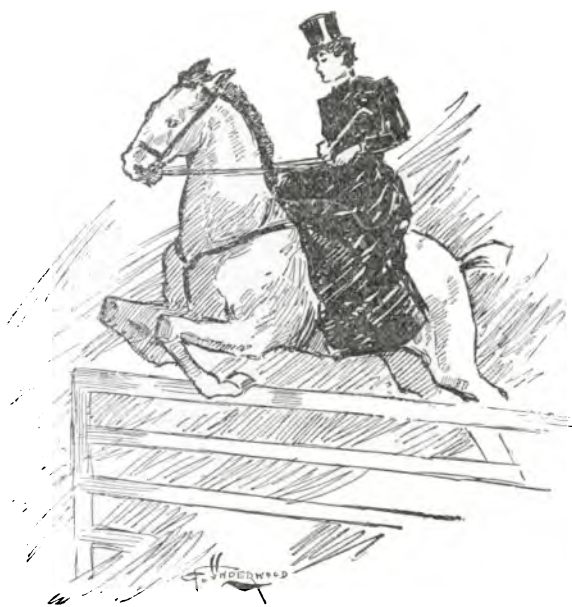
“I found the dear old boy convalescing, but wofully limp and weak. Tremaine says he was wild as a loon when the men brought him in. They saw that he was burning with fever for days, and begged him to go to the cantonment for medical attention, but he bade them mind their own business and obstinately stuck to the work. The gentlemen of the survey soon saw that he was going flighty and, later, delirious, and they took the responsibility of telling the sergeant he must be sent thither. They made a fore-and-aft litter by lashing saplings together, hitched on a couple of pack-

mules, roped Randy inside the thing, and made a four-day march of it. Luckily, Tremaine had a capital medical officer and Randy a splendid constitution. The fever had a big start, but Dr. Wells and Tremaine's people were utterly devoted to him, and pulled him through, but you never saw such a living skeleton. Dr. Wells says he will mend rapidly now, as he eats about six square meals a day and is hungry between times. Mrs. Tremaine nursed him like a mother, Heaven bless her! and now Miss Florence reads to him by the hour."

And at this point in Whittaker's innocent missive, Mrs. Hayne, who was clinging to her husband's arm and reading with him, suddenly looked up in his face and said, "Oh, Lawrence! wouldn't that be—almost ideal?"

"Floy" Tremaine, as she was called in the regiment, was an only child, born and reared in the Riflers. Two years of her life had been spent in the East at school, but with that exception it had known no companionship or association outside the garrison that was the temporary home of her father's company.

An open-air, joyous, healthful life it was, admirable for nerves, arteries, and digestion, yet destructive to complexion, for at fifteen Floy Tremaine was as brown as a Navajo, when they took her to St. Anne's to school, where she was promptly dubbed "the Squaw." The first six months there, despite the fact that her mother was near at hand, took a good deal of heart out of Florence and some of the prairie tan from her face. Her big, soft, brown eyes grew even more eloquent and pathetic, and her pretty mouth gained some wistful lines about its sensitive corners. She did not take to city girls nor did they to her, until her father came in on leave, and, noting the change in his precious child, took counsel with an old Manhattan friend, ordered a swell riding-costume forthwith, and bade her join the class at Dickel's Academy—not that she needed teaching to ride, but the exercise and open air to be had in the daily demure canter in the park. One or two of the girls were quite dashing horsewomen, and excited the envy and admiration of their classmates by the ease with which they took the conventional



"Clearing them like a bird."



leaps at the hurdles and bars; and when one of them, flushed with triumph, after receiving the compliments of the master, reined up beside our silent Florence, on a rainy afternoon when their ride had to be within doors, and rather patronizingly queried, "Ah, don't you do something of this sort out on the plains, Miss Tremaine?" Florence reddened a bit and said, "The children do sometimes," which led to prompt inquiry as to her meaning, and the explanation that the cavalry horses and even the Indian ponies would take such obstacles in their stride and hardly rise to the leap at all. Asked to illustrate she put her bay at the hurdles, clearing them like a bird; then, turning to Miss De Ruyter, she said: "You noticed even this horse hardly had to spring. Now if Mr. Dickel will let me have the bar a foot higher I can show you where he has to exert himself a bit;" and she did, and no other one of the girls dared attempt it. Then she asked to have her saddle removed and rode her horse over the hurdles bareback, and when he was going at an easy canter about the ring amazed the class by leaping lightly off and on

again, her slim, strong young hands grasping the mane, yet never dragging upon the rein. This made her envied, but hardly enviable, for the erstwhile champions of the school gave it out that she had been a "child wonder" in some far-western circus. It wasn't until Flo's second year at St. Anne's that she began to find either friends or appreciation there. When she left at the close of that second year, there was one set at least among whose members she was well-nigh worshipped. She had not finished the course. She needed at least one more year, said the teachers, but it couldn't be. Tremaine had listened to the tempter, invested his scant savings in a Colorado mine that for one year gave dividends galore, and then—gave out. There could be no separate establishment maintained on the pay of a captain of infantry, who was keeping up a heavy life insurance. Florence and her mother were recalled to the Riflers, and, to still further promote the economy demanded by their misfortune, Captain Tremaine begged to be allowed to go to the cantonment on the Catamount, relieving with his company a like

force that had been there in exile over a year. People at regimental headquarters thought it absolutely heartless in him to take Mrs. Tremaine and dear Florence to such a desert, so near the Navajos to the north, and so exposed to danger from predatory bands of Apaches from across the Arizona line. But neither Mrs. Tremaine nor Florence shared their views. Floy was to have her books, her birds, her horse; her mother could direct her reading, and, as for companionship, there was Mrs. Lee, the wife of their first lieutenant; she was barely twenty-five, and a charming young matron; and Jimmy Crofton, their junior sub, was engaged and would soon bring his bride out to join. She didn't doubt that they would have a perfectly lovely time, hunting, fishing, exploring in the mountains, and riding races down the Catamount. Florence's face would glow with enthusiasm; it would become transfigured, radiant—yes, almost pretty, said some of the ladies—so proud did she seem to feel at sharing her father's lot. So, though few agreed that Florence was a beauty, all decreed that she was a trump,

a fond and dutiful daughter, a sweet, sunny-natured child, who would make a lovely woman and wife one of these days. "Only," said Mrs. Hayne, with a world of tenderness in her tone—"only I hope it may be the right man. Girls with those big brown eyes love so deeply."

The cantonment turned out to be something of an Eden as an army post. Four companies had once been stationed there, so there was lots of room, but after the last lot of Apache marauders had been translated to the shores of the Atlantic, matters aboriginal quieted down in Arizona and western New Mexico. The cavalry were needed elsewhere, and could not easily be supplied at so isolated a post; so the two troops were marched back to the valley of the Bravo, and then, soon after Tremaine moved thither, it was decided to recall one of the two infantry commands maintained there; that sent Captain Thompson back to headquarters, and left only the Tremaines, the Lees, and Dr. Wells, for Jimmy Crofton's *fiancée's* father had got him away on detached service; and this was the commissioned society

left at Catamount when Randy Merriam, borne in a litter, delirious, and wearing the willow for Fanny McLane, was brought in to be nursed and coddled back to health again, and Tremaine made ready for him a big, airy room under his own roof.

Not for six weeks was Randy able to ride again, and states have been lost and won in less. There is little need of dwelling on the progressive stages of the unpremeditated siege. Billy Whittaker got there comparatively early in the game, when convalescence had just begun to be assured—when Florence, shy and soft of voice, was just beginning the daily readings aloud to her patient—readings which, as such, began soon to shorten, though reader and audience remained long and longer in each other's presence. By and by the book was but a superfluity. It lay unopened in her lap, as she sat, with downcast eyes and flushing cheeks, beside the hammock wherein her hero patient lay, and the anxious mother noted how, little by little, the girl's soft, silvery tones would become hushed,—how his voice, deep and strong again, yet tender and sub-

dued, would take up the thread of some old, old story; and one day in alarm she fled to her husband's study, for Florence was weeping in her room.

"Do not interfere by look or word," said that wise man. "He will be well enough to rejoin his fellows in the field next week, and they'll soon get over it. If they don't—they can get married. That will put an end to it."

"But think," persisted his better half; "it's Florence I'm troubled about. It's she who may not soon get over it. Hers is a deep——"

But here the captain arose and amazed his wife by taking her in his arms and speaking with a choking sob in his voice.

"Don't talk of it, Dot!" he said. "I'm the one to blame. I never thought of Brownie as anything but a child until three days ago. I've been praying you wouldn't see it—that there'd be nothing more to see, but——" and here the gray stubble about the captain's mouth began to twitch and work convulsively, and he had to stop.

"You know he was engaged—to somebody—East, and it was broken off," said Mrs. Tre-

maine, "and I hadn't thought of danger until just a day or two ago. Now—if he's going next week, as he says—and she has learned to care for him, what *can* we do?"

"He *is* going next week," said Tremaine. "He told me yesterday he ought to go now, and wished to go now. It was Wells who forbade. But Grafton always liked Merriam and Hayne believes in him. Our Florence might do worse, Dot."

"But do you understand?" she said, "do you realize that, just from proximity perhaps, Florence may have learned to care for him, while he is still thinking of his lost love?"

"You mean that—you think it all Florence and not Merriam?" he asked, starting back, and holding her from him, and looking with amaze and incredulity into her eyes—straight into her anxious, tearful face. "Why, Dot, it isn't possible! She—he—he must have learned to care for her. It couldn't be otherwise. Only I hadn't thought of Floy except as a child, and I wasn't prepared."

Like many another father, to whom a daughter is as the apple of the eye, Tremaine could

see no fault, no failing in his child. To him she was the fairest, as she was the best, fondest, most dutiful girl in the whole army. One of his favorite plans had been to take her to West Point the previous summer, and let her, as he said to himself, "paralyze the corps." One of the sweet dreams he had often dreamed was of the evening when, with Florence on his arm, he should re-enter the old mess hall, which he had not visited since it was bravely decked for the Asth-of-August hop, the year of his marriage. He had promised to take her thither for the graduating ball, and had pictured her as the belle of the occasion, sought eagerly by the cadets as their partner for waltz or "two-step;" and, as in his eyes she was the most perfect creature that ever lived or moved, his one anxiety was lest the boys in gray, always susceptible, should forget that Floy was only a child and fall in love with her forthwith. It never occurred to him as a possibility that Floy in her turn might fall in love. But there was no delicious visit for Florence to the Point that year. The moment examinations were over at school her mother started



"It lay upon her lap."

with her for the far West, and Tremaine met them at Santa Fé Junction. Then, after one brief week at Sedgwick, they had started for the cantonment, and there had led their uneventful life until the coming of Randy Merriam, prostrate, with the days of another June. And now, while Florence was in tears and hiding in her pretty room above stairs, this errant, erring, invalid warrior, with no word or sign of being himself sorely heart-smitten, was determinedly talking of going back forthwith to the mountain trails. Tremaine would not let his beloved helpmeet speak, either to Florence or to Merriam, but he fully meant to say more words than one to Merriam himself, and then he bethought him of Dalrymple, and the famous frock that doughty major donned whenever he sallied forth to ask the intentions of O'Malley's dashing light dragoons, and this reflection gave him pause. If, either by accident or design, the heart of his precious child had become wrapped up in Merriam, then Merriam should not leave the post without an explanation — there was yet time. It might be that the poor fellow was really sore

smitten himself, and that the tender but unconquered heart of his daughter was touched with pity for his suffering.

Meantime the culprit officer himself had been carefully lifted into the doctor's buggy, and with that excellent practitioner was enjoying a drive. The one thing Wells could not understand was that, while his patient rapidly gained in health, flesh, and appetite, he seemed so to droop in spirits. Not one word had he been told of Merriam's broken engagement, beyond what Mrs. Tremaine had imparted, and she could give but scanty information. Merriam was grateful for all the care and attention lavished upon him, grateful for returning strength, for sunshine, fresh air, and the brisk drive along the shores of the winding Catamount, but Merriam was silent, smiled but seldom, and laughed not at all. Merriam was plainly troubled, and that night, when Mrs. Tremaine asked her friend the doctor how his patient enjoyed the drive, that gentleman replied that if it did him good he gave no sign. "I believe," said he "that Merriam's in love, and that's why I cannot under-

stand his eagerness to get back to his troop. And the mother leaped with hope. She, too, had had other plans for Florence than that she should marry a subaltern officer; but if by chance Floy had chosen for herself and fallen in love with one, it could not have been without some persuasion, some pleading on his part. It must be that he was the first to love and to plainly show it.

That night Florence was very quiet. She read aloud to her father, as was her custom, and clung to him as he kissed her good-night. Merriam had gone early to his room, as though fatigued by the drive or rendered drowsy by the unaccustomed motion in the air. Somewhere about three in the morning there was an unusual sound of voices in excited talk near the guardhouse, and Tremaine awoke and was dressing hurriedly, when rapid steps came up the walk, and the sergeant of the guard, with a dust-covered courier, stood at his door. They bore a note from Whittaker. A serious row had occurred between some of the troop and a party of miners and prospectors who had been camping near them for three

days. Pistols were drawn, with the result that one miner was killed, two troopers and one prospector were seriously, perhaps mortally, wounded, and several others were injured. Could Dr. Wells come out to them at once for a few hours, at least, and was Merriam able to ride? The young prospector who was so seriously wounded had begged to see him, as he had important information for him, and bade them tell Mr. Merriam that his name was McLane, a son of the man who was about to marry Miss Hayward. A pencilled note in a closed envelope accompanied the verbal message for Merriam.

Florence, listening at her half-open door as the captain read Whittaker's dispatch aloud to her mother, shrank back to her bedside, covered her face with her hands and sank to her knees. It was thus she was found a few moments later. Merriam, aroused by the unaccustomed sounds, had lighted his candle and, partially dressed, came forth into the broad hallway of the commanding officer's quarters, and Tremaine met and gave him the message and the note, which latter Randy

tore open and read with staring eyes. For a moment he stood confounded, then turned sharply to Tremaine: "Now, sir, I've *got* to go, and go at once—when Wells does," then turned and hurried to his room.

The captain himself aroused his post surgeon, told him the news, and bade him see and quiet Merriam as soon as possible. The dawn was breaking and the rosy light was in the eastern sky when the doctor reached his patient, finding him fully dressed and rapidly stowing in his saddle-bags the simple articles of a soldier's toilet.

"This won't do, Randy. You're not fit to stir," said he. But his determination oozed when Merriam, with white face, turned and said:

"More than my life's at stake here, doctor—it's a woman's honor, and I'm going, live or die."

CHAPTER IV.

STRANGE to say, the journey back to the Mescalero seemed to benefit rather than injure Merriam. The doctor vainly endeavored to restrain him—to induce him to shorten the long days' marches, but Merriam declared he was never so well as when in saddle, and that nothing wearied him so much as waiting. If anything, he seemed less jaded than his physician when, on the third day, they reached the bivouac of the little command, and Billy Whitaker welcomed them to a supper of bacon and frijoles, and calmed Merriam's feverish impatience by the news that the civilian who had so desired to see him was still alive, conscious, but sinking rather than gaining. The miners' camp was a mile away. The dead had been buried, and the feud dropped with the brief prayers with which the bullet-riddled body was consigned to earth. Wells' first duty lay with the two troopers, who were in bitter



"Took the hint and slouched away."

pright, and no morsel of food passed his lips until he had ministered to them. Then Merriam had to wait until he had swallowed some coffee, and then, taking Whittaker with them, they rode forward to a branch of the cañon, where at nightfall they came in view of the fires of the little camp. Wells made prompt examination of the wounded man, and came out from the rude shelter under which he lay, glanced at Whittaker and shook his head. Presently, with a dazed look on his face, Merriam reappeared. "Billy," said he, "stand here and see that there are no eavesdroppers. I—know some of this poor fellow's people, and he has messages to send." The two or three hangers-on took the hint and slouched away. "I may need you to witness his statement later," he whispered. "Come in if I call, but let no one else hear us."

For half an hour the low murmur of voices came from within the "shack," as darkness settled down upon the scene. Then both Wells and Whittaker were summoned, and by the dim light of a camp lantern they knelt beside the pallet of the dying man. "You

know both these gentlemen, by reputation, at least," said Merriam gently, though his eyes were gleaming, his lips quivering, and his hands trembling with some strong and strange emotion. "In their presence I desire you to read over this statement that I have written from your dictation. If it's entirely right say so, sign it, and they will witness your signature, but will have no knowledge of its contents."

For a few minutes hardly a sound save the deep breathing of three powerful, soldierly men and the feeble gasping of the sufferer broke the stillness of the rude shelter. The wounded man lay propped on Merriam's shoulder, but, through weakness from his long illness and the mental excitement of the moment, the latter's trembling grew so marked that Whittaker quickly slipped his left arm under the drooping head and drew his friend away. McLane seemed to gain strength from the vigor of this new support, though he could do no more than whisper thanks. Presently he beckoned to Merriam and pointed to a line on the page.

"I said she was over forty-three—" he began, then Merriam's hand was slipped over his mouth.

"I'll make any corrections you wish, but do not speak of what is there," said he, and with his fountain-pen he erased a word and wrote another. Then the sufferer nodded. "It is all right now," he whispered, and taking the pen was lifted to a half-sitting posture and feebly, scratchily wrote as follows: "John Harold McLane, Jr., aged 25, born June 1st, 1867, Sacramento, California. Died June —, 1892, Mescalero Mountains, N. M." Then, dropping the pen, he fell back to his rude pillow, panting and exhausted. Wells quickly gave him stimulant; then he and Whittaker affixed their names as witnesses. A moment later, while the surgeon remained with his patient, the two young officers clasped hands outside.

"You're weak as a child yet, Randy. What is it, old boy?"

"My God! I can't afford to be weak now," was the fierce answer. "I've got to act—to do as I never did before. How long should it

take our best rider, our lightest rider, to reach the railway. Telegrams must go East at once."

"If he take the back trail—the one you came in by from Sedgwick—five days and nights, least count. If he go around by the cantonment for fresh horses, perhaps seven."

"My God! my God!" cried Merriam. "Even two days may be too long. You're in command, Billy. I can give no orders, but that courier must start before moonrise to-night. Don't ask me to tell you why."

And within the hour, with a sealed packet addressed to Captain Lawrence Hayne, —th Infantry, Fort Sedgwick, a slim little Irish trooper was loping, all alone, jauntily back toward the valley of the Bravo, smacking his lips in anticipation of the good liquor awaiting him at Santa Fé Junction the moment his duty was done. Five days and nights had he before him of lonely ride through a desolate, almost desert land, stopping only when necessary to feed and water and rub down his horse, build his little fire and cook his slab of bacon and brew the battered pot of coffee,

and snatch such sleep under the stars as was possible, braving Indians, rattlesnakes, or mountain lions without a tremor for the sake of an Irishman's pride in his troop, his love of dangerous duty, and his full assurance of a good time at the journey's end.

Another day and a rude grave was dug in the cañon, and the doctor read the simple service of the church over the shrouded form of the young prospector; and then, against that doctor's wishes but not without his reluctant consent, Lieutenant Merriam, with an escort of two troopers, started in person to ride by the shortest trail to Sedgwick.

It was now the 6th of June. It would take him nearly a week to reach and cross the Santa Clara. It might take him eight days to Sedgwick, and every hour seemed a day. Meantime Dr. Wells set about having litters made for the two wounded troopers, and by the tenth of the month had them safely in hospital at the cantonment. He found Tremaine looking anxious, even angered, Mrs. Tremaine troubled on more than one account, apparently, and Florence pale and languid.

"Did Mr. Merriam send no letter?" asked Mrs. Tremaine, after he had told something of their experiences.

"There was no time to write. He begged me to give you his love and gratitude, to give it to *all*, and to say he would write in full the moment he got to Sedgwick. Oh, yes, he is better—much better, but the nervous strain may bring on a return of the fever," said the doctor. Something of solemn consequence, Wells knew not what, had carried Merriam back to the railway. He might have to go East at once.

But Randy never reached the railway. Hayne received and read in startled amaze the contents of the packet brought by the courier, and sent at once from the Junction two telegraphic messages: One to Mr. Ned Parry, of the firm of Graeme, Rayburn & Parry, of Chicago; the other to Mr. Abraham Mellen, New York City; received from the latter neither acknowledgment nor reply, and from the former the brief words: "The marriage took place forty-eight hours ago."

Without any delay, taking only a single

orderly, Captain Hayne rode away northwestward, past the Santa Clara, past the old Mission, and so mountainward until the blue barrier of the Mescalero turned to gray and green, and, almost within its shadows, just as the second setting sun drooped behind its massive crest, he met the trio from the Cata-mountain—Merriam, a haggard, but determined rider, far in the lead. There was no time for salutation.

"What answer?" demanded the lieutenant abruptly and with wide, burning, bloodshot eyes

"Too late," said Hayne, "too late by forty-eight hours."

"You don't mean," gasped Merriam, "that they are married already?"

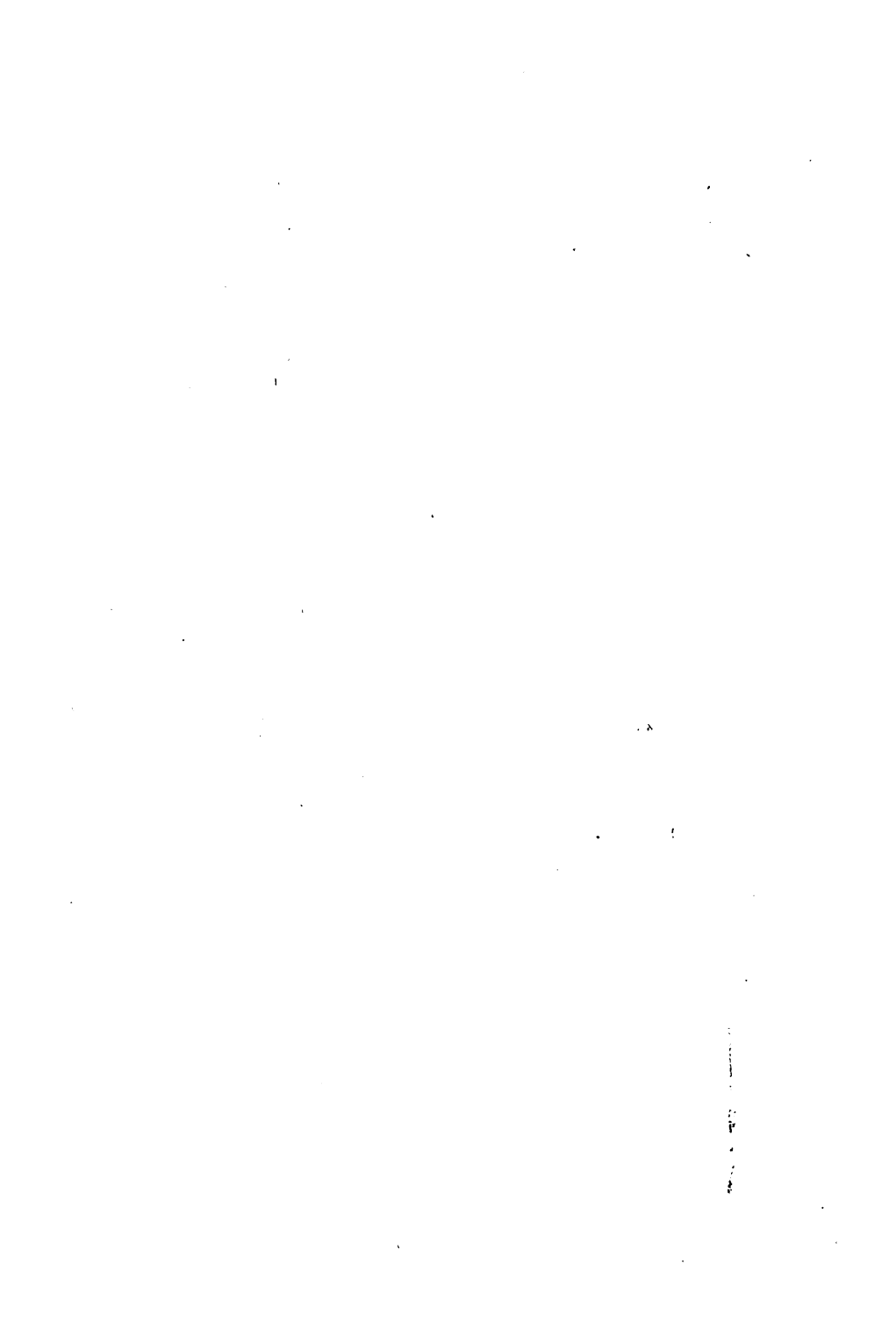
"That's what Parry wires," was the brief response. "Here's the dispatch."

For a moment Merriam sat in saddle, a dazed, stupefied look in his bloodless face. Then his eyes closed and he seemed about to swoon. Hayne sprang from his panting horse just as Merriam's wearied escorts came lumbering to the spot. Together they lifted him

from his seat and bore him to a little patch of grass, bathed his temples from their canteens and gave him a *goutte* of cognac. They made what frontier troops call a "dry camp" that night, just there where the two parties met. There was fuel, a little grass, but no water beyond what they had in their canteens, and with the contents of one of these Hayne brewed a pot of tea while one of the men cooked their frugal supper. They needed no other canopy than that of the heavens in that rare, dry atmosphere, and with the stars for night lights and the waning moon to peep in upon their slumbers later and start the gaunt coyotes at their querulous, unregarded serenade, the troopers slept, or seemed to sleep, until dawn. Twice Hayne awoke to find Merriam staring with burning eyes at the radiant vault aloft, but he wanted nothing, needed nothing. He could not sleep for thinking, he explained, and when the morning came the fever was with him again, and Corporal Tracy galloped northward along the foothills, a long day's ride, to fetch once more the doctor from the cantonment, and with Wells came the am-



"Bathed his temples from their canteens."



bulance. The cantonment lay fifty miles away to the north, Sedgwick a hundred to the south-east. It was the nearest port in the storm.

This time Tremaine would have had fitted up for him a room in the big, airy hospital, but his better-half intervened.

"It would never do after our having had him here before," she said. "He must have his old room under our roof and everything he had before—except Florence."

But when, after ten days of burning fever and desperate illness, Randolph Merriam seemed again to realize where he was, and how weak he was, and how good they had been to him, the first name he whispered, the first thing he asked for, looked for, seemed to long for was Florence—and they let her come.

CHAPTER V.

IT was October before the surveyors finished their work in the Mescalero Mountains and Merriam and his men were recalled to Sedgwick. Late in July Billy Whittaker had been relieved by his restored comrade, and returned to headquarters; he lost no time in calling on the Haynes, and between him and that charming little army matron, Mrs. Hayne, there were exchanged significant smiles and knowing looks, and not a few confidential words, to all of which the blond, Norse-looking captain and husband seemed to give hearty approval. And letters from the cantonment—long letters—came to Mrs. Hayne from her friend Mrs. Tremaine, and long, loving, blissful missives from Florence, and when the Haynes, father and mother, boys and girls, all presently went in to Chicago for a month at the fair, it leaked out in some way that Mrs. Hayne left freighted with mysteri-

ous commissions from her friends at the Catamount, Tremaine's reverses permitting no such extravagance as a journey—especially in view of the many new and lovely items that women decreed as indispensable now. And presently it was known at Sedgwick that, despite his complete recovery, Mr. Merriam seemed to find it necessary to leave the detachment in the mountains and make frequent, even hazardous rides, with only a single orderly, down deep into the cañon of the Catamount, and so on back to Wells and the cantonment. Long before the Haynes returned from Chicago, therefore, the sweet secret was out, and all Fort Sedgwick was talking of Merriam's engagement to Floy Tremaine. She was but eighteen; he twenty-eight. She was shy, sensitive, an idolized daughter. There were times when she was actually lovely, so deep and tender were her eyes, so winning her smile, soft and caressing her voice. He was stalwart, soldierly, fine-looking certainly, but a man few heartily liked, while few thoroughly knew him. He had been wild, extravagant, and some said dissipated the first two or three

years after his graduation. He was known to be frank and truthful, and as a giver and lender had been decidedly too generous. He was a conscientious officer in many ways, except when he was serving under Buxton. He couldn't bear "Bux," and Bux not infrequently spoke disparagingly of Merriam's ability, a thing that might have hurt him in the eyes of his superiors but for the fact that they knew Bux far better than he knew them. Among officers of his own grade there were none whose opinion was worth having who really disliked Merriam, but very few who felt themselves sufficiently intimate with him to actively like. They had nothing against him, except a certain indifference of manner, and nothing that called for enthusiastic praise. His conduct in returning to his regiment from an expensive Eastern station, and putting himself *en retraite* until his debts should be lifted and his duns appeased, met with general commendation. His course in taking the Mescalero detail off a brother officer's hands was held to be characteristically generous. He had lots of good points, had Merriam, they all

conceded, but there were not four people, officers or ladies, in either the cavalry or the Riflers who thought him good enough for Florence Tremaine.

“Wish her joy? Aye, with all my heart,” said the old colonel, when the news of the engagement was brought to him, “but can we hope it?” Even Captain Hayne was not sure, though he tried to be, and found comfort and inspiration in the enthusiasm of his devoted wife and in the stanch opinions of Billy Whitaker. These two were *the* two at Sedgwick to whom that engagement brought gladness without alloy, and since there were not four people in the combined commands who could thoroughly approve the match, it follows that at most, therefore, there could be only one more, but that one was the most confident, the most enthusiastic, the happiest, the gladdest, the proudest, the fondest girl that ever lived—Florence, her own sweet self. In a passion of tears, one exquisite, moonlit evening late in June, she had thrown herself upon her knees by her mother’s side and sobbed out the news that Merriam had told her he

loved her dearly and had asked her to be his wife, and when the mother drew her to her bosom and held her there, and mingled her tears with those of her beloved child, her heart went up in prayer to heaven, for she knew that which Tremaine could not understand, that so deep, so fond, so all-possessing was the love with which Florence would love, probably did love, that there could be no listening to reason. She had pinned her faith on Randolph Merriam and it could not be shaken.

But neither wife nor daughter knew that night that, earlier in the evening, Merriam had sought the husband and father and opened his heart to him, told him his whole story, and begged of him his consent and blessing. "I did love Miss Hayward," he said; "I was fascinated beyond expression and was stunned by the abrupt end of our engagement, but all that passion was killed by the details that have reached me, and in its place have grown up an admiration and love for your daughter that far exceed anything I have known before. I have had hard lessons, sir; I am not worthy the love of one so pure and true as she, but it

shall be my constant endeavor to make her happy."

Tremaine could not answer for a moment. "What have you told her, thus far?" he asked, though not unkindly.

"I told her before I was summoned back to the detachment, after that shooting scrape up in the mountains, about Miss Hayward and my broken engagement, and her prospective marriage. I do not think I had any business to do even that—to tell her anything that might seem to single her out as confidant, but the impulse was stronger than I was."

"Was that—the day before the courier came down with the news of the fight?" asked the captain, with uplifted brows. He was thinking of how Florence had been found by her mother in tears that very afternoon.

"Very possibly, sir, though I cannot recall the day."

Then after a pause: "Answer me this question, Merriam," said the older officer. "If Miss Hayward were to treat this man as she did you; if she were again to come into your life and say, 'Come back to me,' I do not

ask you what your answer would be—I ask, what would your heart say?”

“Nothing. Even if she were not his wife, I could not think of her again without aversion.”

“Yet she is accomplished and a beauty, you say; which my Florence, they tell me, though I cannot see it, is not.”

“She *is* accomplished—too much so. She *is* a beautiful woman, but I look in your daughter’s eyes, sir, and I see her as you see her. God knows I marvel that any one can fail to see her except as you do and as I do.”

And Tremaine held out his hand, gripped hard the lean, brown fingers that clasped in his, essayed to say something that was still weighing on his heart, but gave it up.

“She is all I have to give, Merriam,” he presently said, “but she is all the world to me.”

And so when Merriam returned to Sedgwick to face the volleys of congratulation and the occasional shakes of the head with which his seniors said to him, “She’s a heap too good for you, man,” he could not but be aware



"She laid her hand on his arm."

of the trend of public sentiment, and though time and again he had said as much to her, to her parents, to himself, it must be owned that here was a case where it was not entirely flattering to find the world of his own expressed opinion. It nettled him not a little, and even Whittaker and Mrs. Hayne could not entirely comfort him. It was all very well to say, "You must remember that Florence has been the pet of our regiment ever since she was born. I declare it makes me jealous at times for my own babies," as Mrs. Hayne did. It was gratifying and complimentary to his taste that the commendation of his gentle *fiancée* was so general, but, no matter how conscious a man may be of his own shortcomings, is it ever a comfort to find that all his friends are equally aware of them? It must be owned that there were moments when Merriam grew impatient of these comments upon his unworthiness, expressed or implied, even while his heart rejoiced over the enthusiastic interest displayed by all the garrison in his wife that was to be.

And he was a very devoted lover, too.

Only twice a week did the mail rider go out to the cantonment, but Randy wrote to her long, crowded pages every day, and her letters came even longer and brimful of love and sunshine and happiness. He had sent to St. Louis for her engagement ring, and her delight over it and its beauty was something delicious to see, though she properly rebuked him for his extravagance and warned him never again to spend so much money in jewelry for her while he was yet a poor lieutenant. By and by, when he became a great general, as surely he must, then it might be permissible, but no matter how great or distinguished he might become, never could she be prouder of him or of his love than now, never, never!

As the late autumn wore on it was arranged that the wedding should take place at Sedgwick, and both Riflers and troopers, the —th Foot and the —th Horse, were to give the happy couple a glorious send-off. Both bride and groom elect had seen much of the East and South within the ten years preceding this of '92, and Merriam suggested Southern Cali-

fornia, Coronado Beach, Santa Barbara, and Monterey for their honeymoon trip. Florence would have gone without question had he said Kamchatka or Timbuctoo. Once—twice during the autumn long letters had reached him from Ned Parry—letters over which he pondered long and gravely. Mrs. and Mr. McLane, said the second letter, were once more in Gotham, the vortex of a gay circle, but Mrs. Parry had declined to go East again. He himself had not cared to go, and did not call upon the happy couple or upon their revered uncle when, as it happened, he did have to go. "Mr. Mellen has never written me since my letter to him telling him why I could not attend the wedding," wrote Parry. "Yet he and I have got to have an accounting, and in the near future, too. But first, my boy, I must look up that California story and we are to meet. It may be weeks yet before I can get away, but when I do, I'll wire. If possible get a brief furlough and join me. I'll come by way of Sedgwick, and Charlotte—will not be with us."

And though Merriam soon answered that

letter, he made no mention of his engagement. Cards in due form were issued in January just a fortnight before the ceremony, and that was Parry's first intimation of "the impending crisis." Charlotte was astonished. Both were rejoiced on one account, yet both wished, for the girl's sake again, that he had not been so precipitate. Each believed that the old love still smouldered and could be fanned into flame. They sent a beautiful gift to the bride—some rare cut-glass pieces over which Florence almost cried with delight, and for the first time in long weeks Charlotte Parry wrote to her fair sister in Gotham, and told her of Mr. Merriam's engagement to such a charming girl, the only daughter of a distinguished officer, the pride and beauty of the regiment, the toast of all the cavalry, and other elaborations, some of which, it must be owned, Mrs. Parry coined, but most of them she compiled and evolved from the letter Merriam wrote to her two days after he had posted the cards.

The wedding was lovely, as army weddings usually are. The day was perfect, the music grand, the assemblage all that could be de-

sired; the ceremony, despite the mist of tears in many eyes and Tremaine's manifest emotion, had gone off without a jar. The reception at the Haynes' was simply perfect, as everybody said, and then, though it was a manifest "give-away" of the young couple, and probably very bad form indeed, dozens of men and women had ridden to the junction to meet the west-bound train and see them off; and hardly had their fond faces faded in the distance than another, a very different one, a radiant, smiling, beautiful face, was unveiled to the startled vision of the bride, and the woman who was said to have wrecked Randolph Merriam's life a few months gone by was there in most bewitching guise, despite the dust and grime of railway travel, to overwhelm her with pretty speeches and charming compliments—and complete dismay.

CHAPTER VI.

MERRIAM'S intention had been to go direct to San Diego. Leaving the ladies together, after a cold and embarrassed acknowledgment of Mrs. McLane's greeting and a most unwilling presentation to "my wife," he hurried into another car to be alone and collect his thoughts. It was sundown by this time, and only sundown. For hours yet poor Florence might be at the mercy of that merciless woman, who Merriam now believed could be capable of anything. The thought was unbearable. From the conductor he learned that the McLanes were bound for Coronado Beach, and that settled it. Hastily writing a few lines he folded the paper compactly and walked briskly back to the Pullman. Both faces lighted at his coming, Floy's with infinite relief, Fanny's with laughing triumph. "Not another moment's leave, sir," cried the latter,

"until you've explained where you've been and promised never again to abandon your beloved. Fancy a man who would leave his bride within an hour of their wedding to go and smoke among strangers! Oh, that reminds me, I haven't presented you to Mr. McLane. Will you come with me now?"

Cold refusal was on his tongue, but a sudden thought struck him. "Lead on, madame—I follow," he said, and as she tripped blithely away down the aisle he quickly turned back, bent, and printing one long kiss on Floy's troubled face, hurriedly whispered: "Read this, darling. I'll be with you in one moment, and then she cannot remain." Then calmly and deliberately he followed. Mrs. McLane had halted at the angle of the narrow passage around the smoking compartment, and was awaiting him there. Seeing this he stopped short at the portière, in full view of Florence had she looked around, and bowing, motioned her to proceed. But she had halted for a purpose and meant to have her say. Who was it that declared that even at the altar, in her wedding dress, a woman could

not forgive the rejected lover who had found consolation elsewhere?

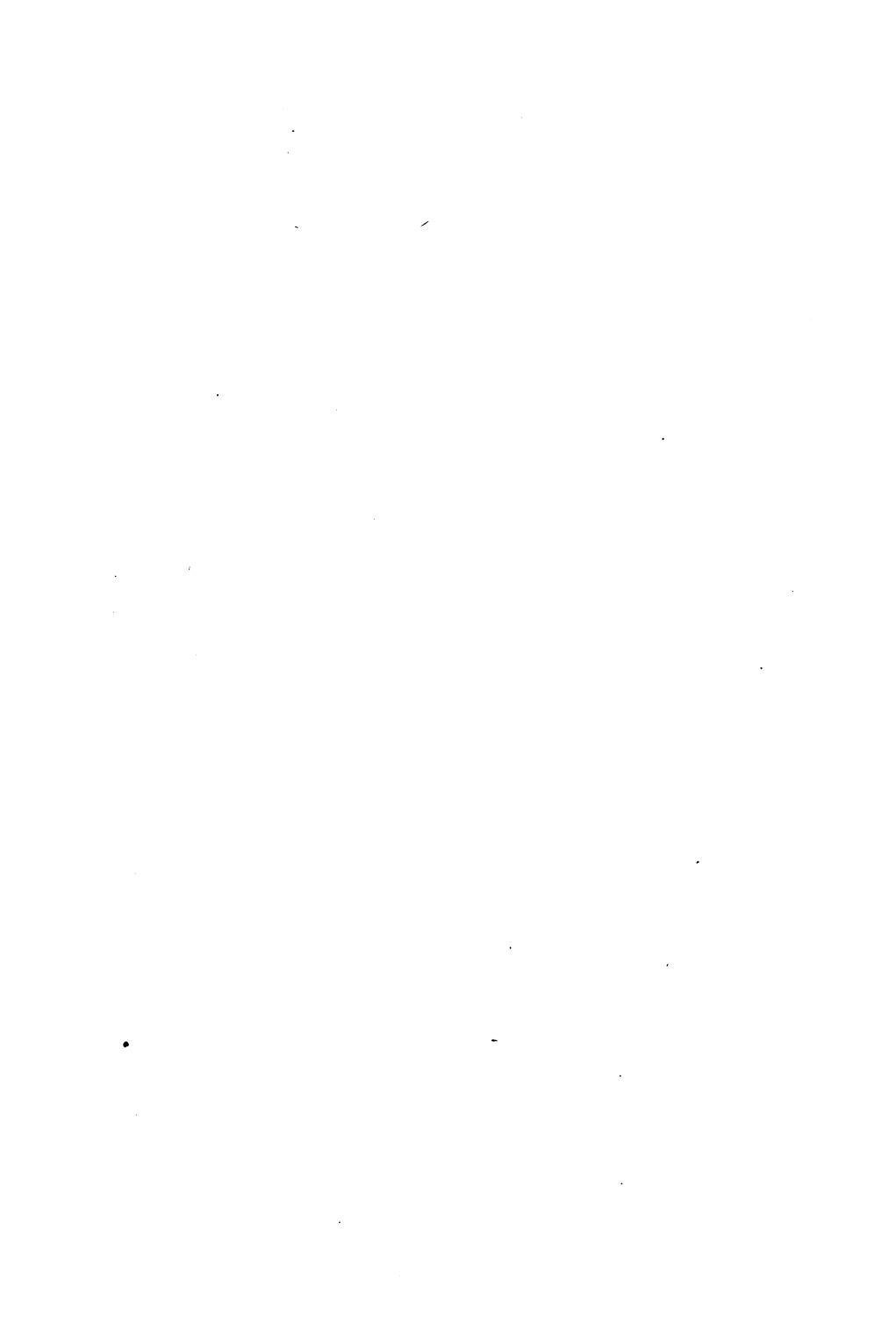
"You are to be congratulated on the elasticity with which you recover from even severe attacks, Mr. Merriam. Your *fever* was said to be such."

"I have been fortunate in two recoveries, Mrs. McLane," was the cool response. "Now if you are ready to present me to Mr. McLane, I am at your service; if not, I desire to return to my wife."

The flush that leaped to her face, the angry light to her eyes she could neither conceal nor control. For a moment she stood there amazed, enraged, and trembling, then these words burst from her lips: "I thought I loved you, Randy Merriam—not two months ago—yes, despite everything! Now I hate you!" And with this melodramatic speech she impetuously and abruptly turned, and for the second time took refuge, dust or no dust, at the rear doorway, the presentation to her husband apparently forgotten. For a proper and reasonable minute he awaited her return,—then, quickly stepping back, seated himself by his young



"His hand sought out and found hers."



wife's side. His hand sought and found hers; his fond eyes, eagerly searching, were not long denied the upward, appealing glance of hers. "Did you read? Do you approve, dear love?" he softly asked. "It would be exasperation to have to travel on with them. Shall I wire to Stoneman?"

"Whatever you say, Randy," was the whispered answer. "Only you won't have to leave me again, will you?"

"Only for an instant, dear, just long enough to send the dispatch from Fauntleroy—one station ahead. She will not trouble you again."

And from Fauntleroy a brief telegram was flashed along the wires to the post quartermaster at a famous old Arizona station, two hours' ride beyond, and when the brilliantly lighted train came steaming up to the platform there stood a brace of officers with welcome in their eyes; and before Mrs. McLane, once again seated in her section and feigning deep interest in her book, could realize what had happened, Mr. and Mrs. Merriam were leaving the car, he merely raising his hat in

civil farewell,—the bride, however, as the result of brief conference with her lord, smiling bravely down into the upturned face of their startled neighbor and saying, "I hope you may have a delightful journey, Mrs. McLane. Good-night."

"Why—I thought—surely you told me you were going to—direct to San Diego, and I had planned to have ever so long a talk with you," and Mrs. McLane had possessed herself of that slender hand, and was hanging on suspiciously hard.

"Yes, we'll be there after a little," was the serene answer. "We visit old friends first at Fort Stoneman," and with that our army girl withdrew the hand which hypocritical social ethics prescribed she should extend. She had even the hardihood to glance over her stylishly robed shoulder and nod a cheery, *insouciant* farewell to the fair yet clouded face at the Pullman window. Verily Floy's elasticity was equal to her husband's.

Mr. McLane they had not met at all, nor did they again, on that now unclouded wedding journey, once encounter her. It was

easy to trace the wanderings of this Manhattan magnate and his lovely wife. Their movements were the subject of daily paragraphs in the papers from San Diego to Seattle, and not until they had left Coronado Beach did the Merriams go thither. Not until the McLanes were heralded at the Palace in San Francisco did the happy couple move on to Monterey, and there one morning as they were at breakfast the papers were brought in, and there was sensation. Merriam had not yet begun to appear at table with that infallible symptom of the long-married couple—a newspaper for his own entertainment and silence for his wife, and he and she were glancing about the great apartment and exchanging happy, low-toned confidences about their surroundings and possibly their fellow-sojourners.

A man at an adjoining table, however, had opened the sheet and suddenly exclaimed, "My God!" and this instantly attracted the attention of his wife, who had resignedly accepted the situation and was finding such consolation as she could in studying the occupants of the room. He began to read aloud: "Mr.

John Harold McLane, of New York, who with his charming young wife has been spending a few days in this city, was shot and dangerously wounded while stepping into his carriage in front of the University Club at a late hour last night, his unknown assailant escaping in the confusion that followed. The ball, evidently a heavy one, struck him with such force that the shock felled him instantly. He was carried into the club house again, where Drs. Storr and Humphrey, who were present, made prompt examination. It was found that after striking full force and partially destroying the contents of a flat pocket-book in his overcoat, the ball, deflected evidently, had torn its way round under the skin of the left breast and burst its way out below the armpit. Bleeding was profuse and the shock severe, yet the physicians think that the chances are in favor of his recovery.

"There is much mystery about the affair. The coachman says a man and a woman walked up and down in front of the club on the opposite side of the street full half an hour before Mr. McLane came out, he being accompanied

by a friend who had formed one of their party at whist. Instantly the strange man left the side of the woman, hurried across the street, and, placing his left hand on Mr. McLane's shoulder, turned him sharply and accosted him in low, somewhat angry tone. The moment he spoke Mr. McLane struck furiously with his right hand at the other's face, then thrust it into his overcoat pocket, where later a pistol was found. It was at this instant that the other fired. The carriage horses, startled, attempted to run, and by the time the coachman had regained control of them they were some distance down the street. On his return, Mr. McLane was being borne into the club. Quite a little crowd had gathered, but nobody but himself and the friend referred to, who was somewhat intoxicated, had seen anything of the shooting. A neighbor said he saw a man and woman hurry round the corner, but that was the last of them. The police have a clue which they refuse to divulge. Mrs. McLane, who was attending the brilliant reception given at the residence of the Hon. J. L. Sanbourne, was not informed of the tragedy until an hour

later, and was prostrated by the shock. At 3 A.M. the wounded man was resting under the influence of opiates."

Breathless, Merriam listened, his face paling, and breathless Florence watched him. When the reader had finished and his wife began to ask questions, Florence said no word. Her dark, pathetic eyes were fixed upon her husband's pallid face, then timidly she stretched forth her hand. "Randy, dear!" she whispered.

Merriam roused himself with a sudden start. "Forgive me, Floy darling! But this is a dreadful shock. Will you mind my getting a paper?" and he looked appealingly about him. A waiter sprang forward. Did the captain wish anything? The morning paper. Certainly. Which one? Oh, any one—all of them in fact; and presently they were brought, as was the breakfast, and the breakfast grew cold while he read on through paper after paper, grewsome details in one and all, yet not the details he sought.

And Florence had lost all appetite and was intent only on him, waiting almost meekly for

him to speak. Some of the papers declared the injuries mortal. Randy passed the papers one after another without comment to her, as he read them. She took each as it came, obediently, helpfully, but folded and laid it by her side, then returned to her wordless study of his troubled face. At last the fourth sheet was finished, and with a long sigh he turned and saw her. "My darling! my darling!" he whispered, a great shame and sorrow overpowering him as he noted the intensity of her sympathy mingling with the mournful sense of her utter nothingness to him at the moment. "Oh, Florence, how could I be so forgetful of you? But I have had a dreadful shock. You do not know what this means, what it *would* mean if McLane should die now—and I cannot tell you."

And all she said was "Hush! Randy, dear, I don't wish you to tell me now."

But McLane did not die—at once, at least. Three weeks the police worked at that clue and the doctors at him, and neither with much success—certainly with little help from the victim, who was in woful state of collapse

much of the time, protesting ignorance of any excuse for shooting on the part of anybody, and consumed with dreadful fear of death. It was a wonder that under the circumstances he rallied sufficiently to be up and able to be moved. The March winds of 'Frisco were leagued against him. The doctors wished to take him back to Coronado, but he declared that any part of California would be death to him. He wished to go home at once. Within the week of the shooting Ned Parry arrived from Chicago, and had some long interviews with his sister-in-law, but was not allowed to see the patient; neither was she except at rare intervals, an affliction which she bore with Christian resignation. Then Parry had to go back, but not before he had received a note from Merriam, had visited him, and had shown every attention to and deep interest in his gentle bride, and had had one long conference with the husband, alone.

When Mr. McLane was declared well enough to move they carried him aboard a steamer and sent him to Panama, Fanny, his wife, in attendance, as in duty bound. But even the



"And her hours were mainly spent on deck."

best and biggest stateroom was close and stuffy, as she said, and her hours were mainly spent on deck. It was the nurse who had to bear with Mac's ceaseless complaints. He had grown suddenly old, childish, decrepit, fearful. They had to stay some days at Panama, and had a wretched time, at least he did, being transferred thence to Havana, where he was enjoined to remain at least six weeks. But some morbid longing drew him irresistibly back to New York. Go he would, and in April they exchanged the summer seas, the soft, perfume-laden air, the warm sunshine of the tropics for the fogs and bluster of the North Atlantic seaboard. Pneumonia set in and claimed the feeble wreck for its own. Several weeks before the anniversary of that brilliant wedding and still more brilliant reception, Fanny McLane was weeping decorously in widow's weeds and listening to the details of the last will and testament.

Much, but not all, had been left to his beloved wife, Frances Hayward McLane, but even that much was curiously bestowed. Why should Uncle Mellen be so largely a bene-

ficiary? Why should he be placed in charge of her property? Was she not old enough to look after what was her own? Why should Uncle Mellen here and Uncle Mellen there appear on page after page of that formidable document? With alarming suddenness the tears had vanished, dried off, presumably, by the hot flush on her lovely cheek. Some one had obtained undue influence over her husband in his last moments, she declared. Some one had swindled her. Some one should be given to understand she was a child—a puppet—no longer, and two some ones, Uncle and Aunt Mellen, had a tremendous scene with the widow before the funeral baked-meats were fairly cold—before the flowers began to droop about the new-filled grave. One row led to another, and then to litigation, and then sister Charlotte had relented, sister love and tenderness triumphing over the sense of indignation which followed Fan's repeated neglects of sisterly letters and sisterly advice, and she came East with her imperturbable Ned, and found Fan looking white and ill and troubled, and while Ned remained for a legal battle

royal with the girl's putative guardian, Charlotte took Frances to a charming resort in the West for a placid summer, and that fall the lovely widow was domiciled in an apartment of her own within view of the flashing waves of Lake Michigan, within sound of the ceaseless roar of Chicago.

Meantime the junior member of the great firm of Graeme, Rayburn & Parry had been doing yeoman service in "pinching" Uncle Mel- len, and many a valuable concession had been made, and, thanks to her gifted brother-in-law, the fair and now fully restored widow found herself in apparently undisputed possession of the revenues of certain houses, lots and lands, stocks and bonds that would have been beyond her claim; and now had come the longing to spread her wings and fly, for with independence came the intolerance of Charlotte's well-meant, yet ill-advised monitions. She would have no elder sister preaching "Don't do this and don't do that," day after day to her. She could not assume at all times the expression of a grief she did not feel. The weeds, "the customary suits of solemn black," even the

little caps were donned whenever she went abroad, but that cap was so coquettish as to draw down Lot's denunciation, and even deep mourning was to be discarded long before the prescribed twelvemonth.

Freak, whim, caprice of every kind had her elder sister expected of her, even to the encouragement of this well-groomed, well-preserved broker-magnate who came on plea of new investments and business interests, but that Frances should declare her intention of going to visit Fort Sedgwick, even under the protection of the Graftons' roof, had never occurred to her for a moment as a possibility. It was stunning! It was too dreadful for anything! She would have written mad, sisterly protest to Mrs. Grafton, but for Ned's stern prohibition. "Let her go, my child," said he, in the half-paternal way he sometimes assumed. "Let her go. I know Grafton, I think. I know Mrs. Merriam, and I believe I know Randy. It's my profound conviction Fan is going to get the lesson of her life."

CHAPTER VII.

THE manner in which Mrs. Frances McLane secured her invitation to visit the Graftons reflects credit on her generalship if not on her general character. She was deep in widow's weeds and woe the lovely summer of '94 so long as she remained in the neighborhood of the mausoleum of the dear departed, and Mrs. Grafton twice or thrice ran down from the Point to pour out sympathy and consolation, but dear Fanny had sustained too severe a shock. This dreadful, this mysterious, this murderous assault upon Mr. McLane had unnerved her completely, said Mrs. Grafton, on her return to her liege, and she does not seem to rally at all. Later, as we have seen, Charlotte took her sister West, and later still the Graftons, *en route* to Sedgwick at last, stopped five days in Chicago on their way, and Fanny was at the station to meet them on their arrival, and insisted then, as she had before by

letter, upon their being her guests at her own apartments at the Clarendon. She had a lovely little room all ready for them. Now Grafton was a provident man, an economical man, and five days' hotel bills made certainly a big hole in a month's pay. Something even then whispered to him that this extravagance were better than that to which acceptance of the widow's invitation would lead. But he banished the thought as unworthy and uncharitable. Fanny welcomed them with infinite tact and taste—made them feel that their coming was a blessing to her, so sad and lonely was her life now that it was no longer blessed by the companionship and devotion of the incomparable husband whom she had lost. She could not accompany them to the opera or to concerts and theatres, but she had the best seats secured, and Ned and Charlotte were properly attentive; and when it was time for the Graftons to move on the ladies actually parted with tears, Fanny looking so white, so pathetic, so fragile, and protesting that Mrs. Grafton was the one friend to whom her heart clung in its bereavement and desolation. A

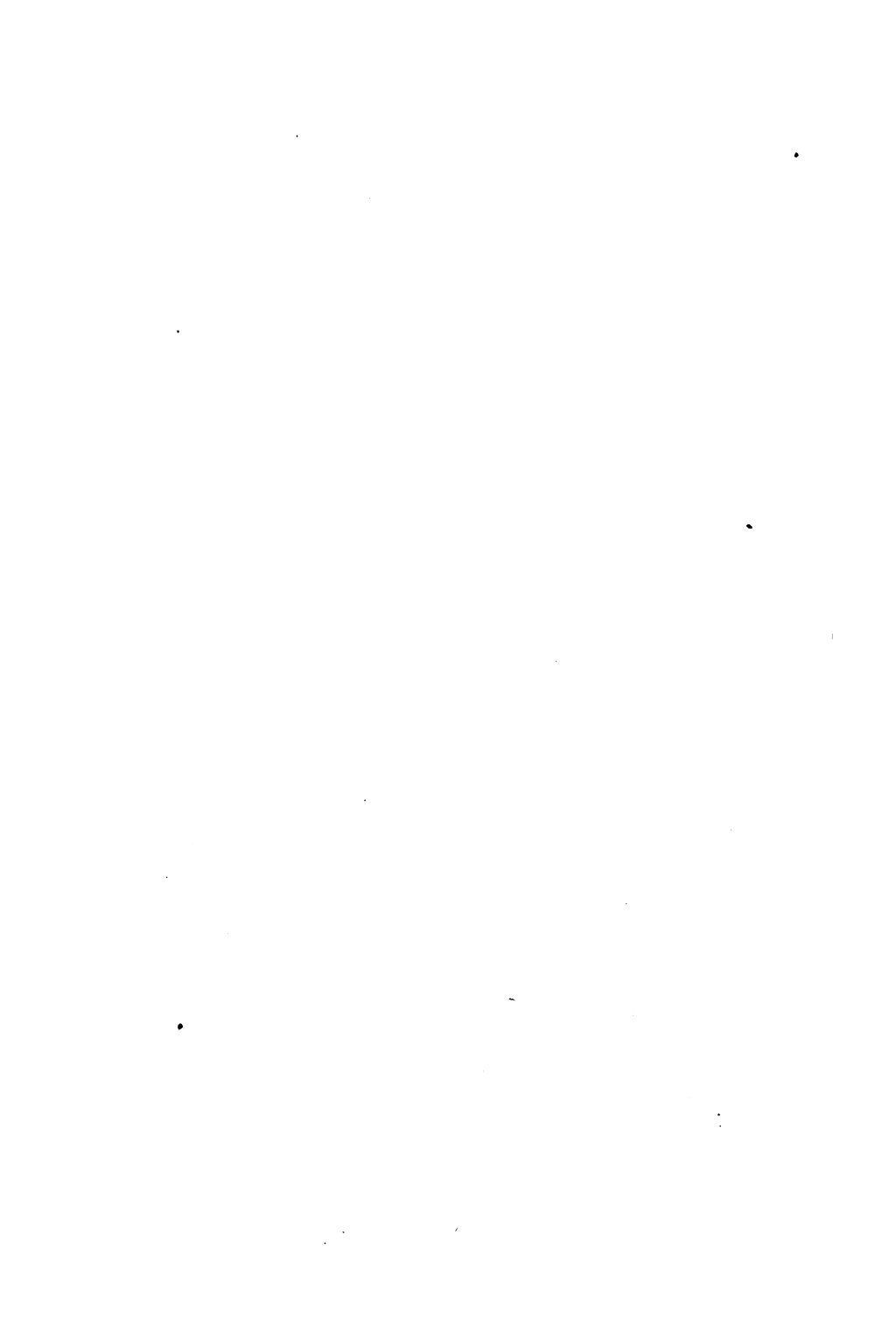
hacking little cough had already set in (this was late in the fall), and the rigors of the Lake Michigan climate seemed telling severely upon the Gotham-born girl, and urgently did Mrs. Grafton press her to leave this blustering shore and to come to her in that land where coughs and bronchial and catarrhal troubles are unknown, to bask in the sunshine and drink in the delicious air of southern New Mexico; and Fan declared that could she but be with Harriet her cough would never worry her, but—it could not be—it could not be! There were important legal matters to be settled. She must fight her battle alone. She could not yet go so far from that sacred dust.

All the same the Graftons were not fairly settled at Sedgwick when Fan's legal difficulties seemed to have been settled and her cough grievously augmented. The doctors talked of Bermuda or San Diego, but the idea of going to Bermuda, among strangers, was a horror, so she wrote; and as for Coronado where, less than a year ago, she had been so happy, so blest?—no! no! it was impossible! Yet Chicago for the rest of the winter was out of the

question, especially since the estrangement that had grown up between her and her relatives in the East, that had even to some extent involved Charlotte, her beloved sister. Mrs. Grafton could not help thinking how remarkably Frances had developed since their school-days. Then she had never impressed any one as being capable of much deep feeling. There had been a few months indeed when Mrs. Grafton was angry and astonished at Frances, but those were just after she "broke" with Randy Merriam and married McLane, but Fan had wheedled her out of this unfavorable mood and convinced her that she had never really cared for Mr. Merriam, who, somehow, failed to inspire her with that feeling of respect, even reverence, which she felt was due the man she married; whereas Mr. McLane was a gentleman of such dignity and force of character that she seemed powerless in his presence, and his love was the sweetest flattery, the most surprising, thrilling joy she had ever known. Not until he came did she dream what love really meant, and then it was duty, it was justice, it was honor that com-



Billy Whittaker.



pelled her to release Mr. Merriam. Had she married *him* she would have gone to the altar with a lie on her lips, for she loved another. Grafton said nothing, but 'seemed to be thinking a good deal, and it was plain that he did not thoroughly approve of the fickle Frances. When, however, Merriam surprised everybody at the Point by his marriage to Floy Tremaine, Grafton concluded it time to drop the matter.

All the same he could not suppress his surprise when Harriet announced that Fanny had actually almost consented to come to them. "I thought you knew I disapproved of that scheme entirely," said he.

"You did, dear, when I first spoke of it, and so did I. I didn't think it would do at all, but Fan talked so frankly about Mr. Merriam and the lovely time they'd had together on the Pacific coast,—with him and his charming bride,—and how he and she had laughed over their affair at the Point and agreed that it would have been absurd, and now they were such good friends, and she'd had such a sweet, sympathetic message from Mrs. Merriam after

her sad, **sad bereavement—why, what more was to be said.**"

Grafton listened rather grimly. He was many years older than his wife, as has been said, and much less credulous. Again the same uneasy presentiment oppressed him. "I don't think she should come here, Harrie," he gravely said. "Anywhere else, perhaps, I could have shared with you the feeling of welcome—certainly the desire to pay the debt of hospitality, but at Sedgwick, with the Merriams here, it cannot be."

And here poor Mrs. Grafton broke down and wept. "Oh," she cried, "it's got to be! I thought you'd forgiven her and that all was well; and I urged—and she's coming—ne—ne—next w—week."

We need not record the further remarks of Captain Grafton on this point, since they were after all inoperative, but the first dark shadow over their domestic peace fell that very day and hour. For the life of him he could not but feel that he had been tricked and deceived, and yet so plausible were the explanations he could not brush them entirely aside. **At all**

events he would not now require his wife to recall the invitation, sent and accepted. It might even be as she claimed, that Fan loved and clung to her as her only dear and intimate friend, and craved her society and sympathy now in her bereavement and ill-health, and, though still suspicious and ill-satisfied, he gave his reluctant assent to the plan, and was on hand at the Junction to meet and welcome his unwelcome guest.

The Merriams had been paying a holiday visit to Floy's devoted parents at the cantonment, and were absent from Sedgwick while these preliminaries were being arranged. Otherwise Grafton might have cast conventionality aside and asked Randy for the truth about those alleged lovely times when they were on their wedding journey; but he could not bring himself to write, and indeed there was no time for letters to go and come and decide an issue that was already decided. It was Mrs. Grafton who, two days before the arrival of her lovely guest, broke the news of her coming to Mr. Merriam, and was astonished at his reception thereof.

It was almost sunset of one of those soft, languorous southern days that make even mid-winter warm and grateful in the lower valley of the Bravo. Across the barren level of the parade the troopers were marching up from stables in their white frocks, and sending long shadows striding up the opposite eastward slope of the narrow cañon. The officers, in parties of three or four, were strolling homeward past the now shaded porticoes, on many of which, seated with their needlework or chatting with friends, the ladies of the garrison were awaiting the coming of their lords or lovers—or both. The smooth, broad walks were bright with groups of merry children or sedately trundled baby-carriages. Three or four of the bigger boys were galloping their ponies along the roadway, fresh sprinkled by the huge water-cart. The band that had been playing in its kiosk in front of the line had picked up its music-books and gone trudging barrackward for change of raiment before parade, skirting on the way the circular plat of withered grass maintained at vast expenditure of labor and water at the foot of the staff from

whose shimmering peak hung, well-nigh motionless, the blue and scarlet and white of the national flag. Northwestward the distant line of the Mescalero stood blue-black against the cloudless sky. Away to the east rolled the dun billows of the "Jornada," illimitable in monotony and range. Downward at the ford of the San Mateo some Indian boys and girls were jabbering shrill expostulation to the Mexican herder who was swearing strange oaths at his usually placid *burros*, because they had the good manners to shrink at the edge of the stream wherein these children of nature were disporting, the laughter and screaming, even the splashing of the water, rising distinctly on the air. Out on the mesa to the north the quartermaster's herd was nodding slowly, sleepily homeward, powdered by a dust-cloud of its own raising, and over at the infantry barracks at the westward end of the long line scores of the men were already out in full dress uniform, awaiting the bugle call that should demand the assembly. Mrs. Grafton had been visiting up the row and was coming smilingly back, nodding greeting and saluta-

tion to the ladies on the verandas of the various quarters as she passed, yet walking eagerly so as to be at the gate, as was her habit, when her captain returned from stables; seeing which, some of the younger officers tried to detain her or impede her way. "The captain has stopped to take a drink at Buxton's, Mrs. Grafton. I wouldn't hurry if I were you," said one mendacious, mischievous sub. "I'll leave it to Merriam if he hasn't," thereby detaining Merriam, who was just as eager, apparently, to reach his own gate and receive the fond welcome in Floy's deep, dark brown eyes. Others, too, joined the laughing conspiracy, and gazing beyond them and seeing nothing of her lord among the groups still farther to the rear, she as laughingly surrendered and entered into joyous chat with her captors—the sight of one of the youngest, brightest, and fairest of their number surrounded by half a dozen gallants being naturally a comfort to the lookers-on along the quarters—and when Randy, lifting his cap, would have deserted them and gone his way she was just coquette enough to care to hold

the exhibition—and her attendants—a moment longer.

"Oh, Mr. Merriam! Don't go yet. I've really important news for you. Who do **you** think is coming to visit us?"

Randy had no idea. He smiled politely, even pleasantly, and said he couldn't imagine.

"Well, but guess," persisted Mrs. Grafton, her very pretty face very full of importance.

"The Walkers, from Stoneman?" suggested Randy.

"No, indeed! Nobody from that way. It's from the East."

"Mrs. and Miss Pollard from Marcy?"

"Not a bit of it. No army people at all, but somebody you know very well and like very much."

Then Randy began to look queer, but still couldn't begin to guess. "I'm sure I'm at a loss," he faltered.

"Why, Fanny McLane, of course! She's been in miserable health since her husband died, and they've practically ordered her to try this climate; so she's coming to me. She'll be here Saturday. But of course **you**

know she's in deep mourning yet and can't go anywhere."

For a moment Merriam was too amazed—too startled—to trust himself to speak, and she saw it, and with the quick intuition of her sex saw, too, that something must be done to relieve the embarrassment that would fall upon the party.

"She was one of my bridesmaids,—Fanny Hayward," she hurriedly explained to the surrounding group—"Mr. Merriam's bridesmaid, and the loveliest girl you ever saw; and, just think of it, Mr. Minturn, now she's a disconsolate widow with I don't know how much money all her own," and then nervously she cast an anxious glance at Merriam and again addressed him, as though in self-defense. "You know we visited with her on our way West, and she told me of her charming meeting with you and Mrs. Merriam on your wedding journey, and the lovely times you had before they had to go to San Francisco," and now her voice had become timid and appealing, for she saw something was very, very much amiss. Merriam's face had flushed,

even through its coat of tan, but was now a yellow-brown, all its happy, healthful glow vanished, and Billy Whittaker, looking uneasily at him, had linked an arm in his and seemed about to urge him to come away; yet Merriam had to say something, and this, in evident constraint, is what he said:

"Yes—we—did meet—Mrs. McLane—I'm very sorry to hear she's been ill, and am much surprised to hear she's coming here. Excuse me, Mrs. Grafton, I must hurry on."

That evening Floy and her husband failed to attend the formal hop which was held each week, and their absence was noted, for she loved to dance, and had promised waltzes and two-steps without number to her old friends of the Riflers and the cavalry both. Some one proposed going after them. Mrs. Hayne did call on her way home, for she left early, and inquired anxiously for Florenœ. "She has a severe headache," said Randy, who came to the door with gloom in his eyes, "and she felt too good-for-nothing to attempt it, so I persuaded her to go to her room." He asked them in, but did not invite. Both Hayne and

his wife noted that, and both felt they knew the cause of all the trouble when they met Whittaker ten minutes later and learned from him that the Graftons expected a guest from the East on Saturday—Mrs. McLane.

And Saturday evening she came, almost at the same hour at which she first set eyes on that dreary landscape, and wondered what was the name of those far, blue hills, and who those officers and ladies could be. But this time it was the train from the northeast that bore her in, and its companion from the "Sunset Route" was not yet there; neither was there a swarm of officers and ladies. There was only one of each—a grave, dignified, soldierly man in undress uniform—a young, pretty, stylishly attired dame at his side. The Pullman came to a stop at the platform, the porter sprang out laden with bags and bundles; the conductor stepped off and raised his cap and offered his hand to a vision of feminine charms, a fair, sweet, smiling face framed in dainty little cap. The heavy crape veil was thrown back, and the slender, rounded form was decked in sombre weeds, yet now grace-

fully, effectively was it draped. Even Gratton could not fail to note it. No sign of dust and grime of travel was there. The shrouding, protecting veil and duster had been discarded only just before they reached the station; Annette had stowed them carefully away in the shawl-strap, while her bereaved mistress carefully and skilfully arrayed herself in veil and bonnet that had been boxed throughout the journey. She stepped forth into Harriet's welcoming arms as trim as though she herself had just issued from a bandbox, her joy at being once more with such fond friends decorously tempered by the sense of her ever-present, all-pervading sorrow, and the consciousness of her delicate and uncertain health. Only a moment did she allow herself in Harriet's embrace. No time must be lost in precipitating herself upon the massive and not too eloquently welcoming captain, who held out a hand in his untutored army way, as hands had been extended for the score of years he had been in service, and not at the height of the shoulders as was hers, after the alien mode of the 90's. Into his

arms she did not throw herself, yet looked she as she meant to look and have him see her look, and be impressed accordingly, as though such was her sense of his lofty character and her own need of some strong arm on which to lean, she might even be glad to find shelter there.

"There was always something so appealing about Fan," said Mrs. Grafton sometimes, and indeed there was.

And then the train moved on, and Grafton looked grimly at the stack of Saratogas up the platform, while the orderly was loading bags, baskets, and bundles into the roomy Concord wagon, and the quartermaster's team came rattling alongside to load up with heavy luggage.

"I won't have to see—anybody to-night, will I, dearest?" pleaded the widow of her devoted friend, as they bowled away to the post. "I look like a hag after this dreadful journey, and I'm so tired. Oh! do you get soft water here, or is it all this wretched alkali?" and she studied her friend's already suffering complexion and read her answer there. No matter; she had borax and—other correctives—in abundance.

Inspection was all over. The cavalry were

all at stables down under the bluff as they whirled into the great, spreading garrison and went spinning up the roadway in front of officers' quarters. The captain lifted both ladies out at the gate and assisted Annette to alight; then, giving brief direction to the servant, he raised his cap: "And now you are home, Mrs. McLane, and I will leave you to Harriet while I go down to my horses awhile," and Fan followed him with swimming eyes.

"How blessed you are, Harriet!" she murmured. "So strong, so noble a man! Ah, I have so needed you—both. I'm so thankful to be here."

And as they led her beneath the shaded porch, and bright eyes on other porches looked eagerly on, and her own bright, brimming eyes took in the many odd, unfamiliar yet attractive surroundings in this cosy army home, Fan was wondering how she could ever have thought of such a life—how it was possible for Harriet to be happy in it, while her hostess was already vaguely wondering if, after all, she was quite as content and happy as she was before Fanny came.

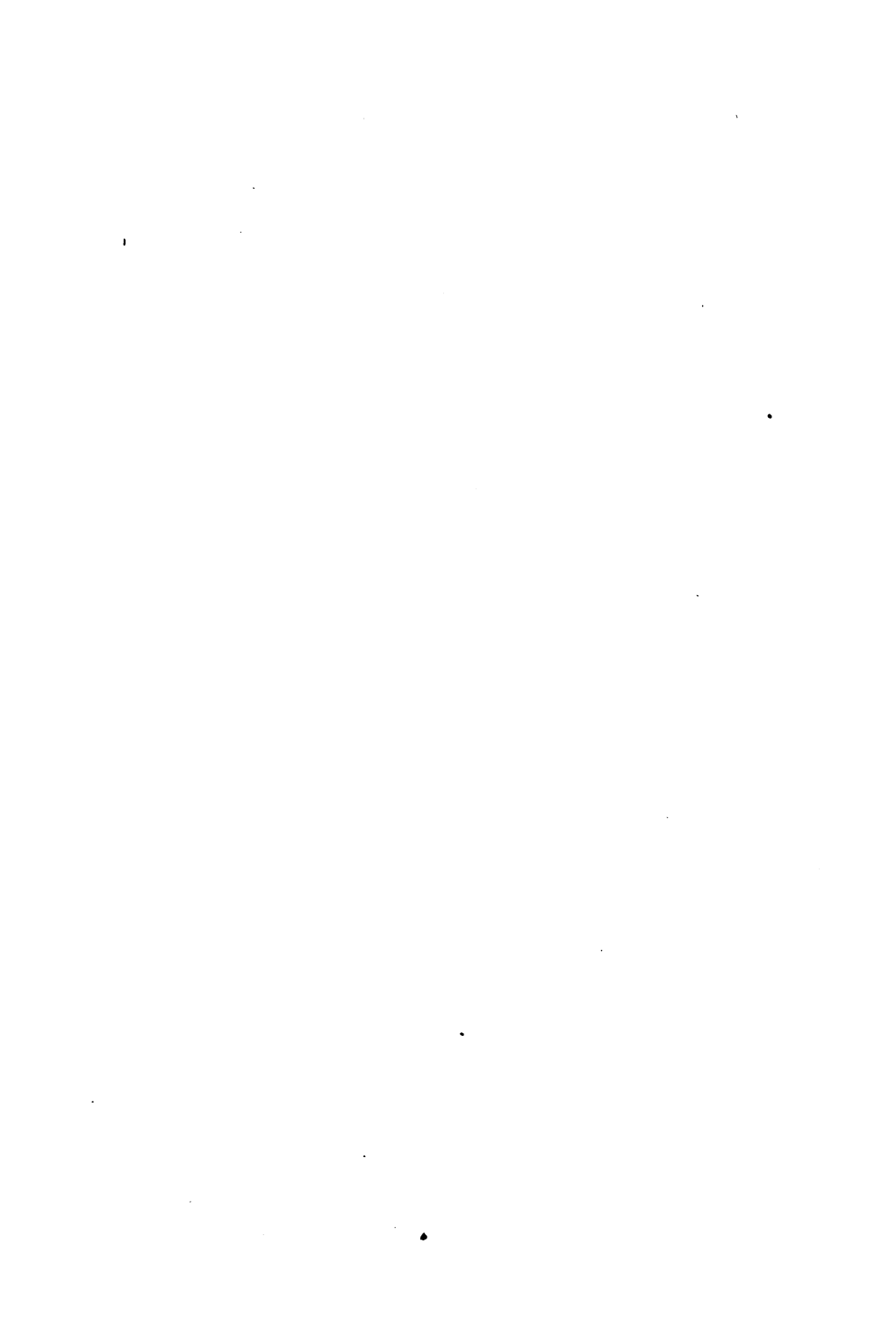
CHAPTER VIII.

A WEEK went by, and by that time, as a member of the Grafton household and a social success at Sedgwick, the lovely widow was an established fact. Everybody, as in duty bound, had called within the seven days, Mr. and Mrs. Merriam with the others and not among the last; but they chose Tuesday evening, which was not a hop night, but the very evening on which dozens of others would be calling, and even then they went in company with the Haynes, and found, as they expected—indeed as they knew—the little army parlor full of people.

Mrs. McLane's welcome was charming. Already the soft air and sunshine, as she was saying, had been of infinite benefit, and her physician must have known exactly what to prescribe for her, for she felt ever so much better, and her cough was so much less frequent. Certainly she was looking wondrously



The Rivals. Mrs. Merriam—"Oh, how glad I am to see you."



well—whether Dame Nature or some more subtle artist had touched the rounded cheeks and the framework of those lustrous eyes. As the quartette entered, Mrs. Hayne, the elder matron, leading, and the men arose and the women callers looked smilingly on, and Mrs. Grafton gracefully presented the first comer, the welcome accorded Mrs. Hayne was cordial and gracious, with just a tinge of reserve, but it was Florence, standing with flushed cheeks just behind her friend and ally, the lovely blue eyes sought out and then lighted instantly with joy and recognition. Both slender white hands were extended, and with a little cry of "*Mrs. Merriam!* Oh, how glad I am to see you again!" the accomplished little lady stepped forward, uplifted her soft lips, and—kissed her. What Florence would have looked and said or done had she not been fully forewarned cannot be hazarded here. "I think it more than probable that she will kiss you, Floy," Merriam had said, "so look as unconcerned as you can." Look unconcerned Floy did not. She reddened. She almost recoiled, but Randolph was at her elbow, and bent quickly forward in

admirable time, with most audacious pleasantry. Any one would have sworn that he hoped to be similarly welcomed. It was more than Mrs. McLane had bargained for.

"Why, Mr. Merriam!" she exclaimed, starting back in apparent confusion and astonishment.

"Do not be disconcerted," said he, with placid smile. "I've always understood that a man should share his wife's joys as well as her sorrows," but the rest was lost because everybody began to laugh, and to believe, as Mrs. Hayne and Mrs. Grafton did *not*, that the relations between the McLanes and Merriams on that idyllic wedding journey must indeed have been delightful. There were two men, however, who laughed not—Hayne and Whitaker. Grafton was away on duty, and there was one woman who felt a stinging sense of defeat—Fanny McLane herself. In that one action on the part of Merriam there was manifest utter indifference to her former fascinations, utter defiance of her powers.

A dozen people, altogether, must have been gathered in the room at the moment, and some

officers were seated on the veranda without. There were not chairs enough, so the men gossiped about the piano, while the women grouped about the guest, and in the general chatter Mrs. McLane had no opportunity of singling out and renewing her advance upon Mrs. Merriam. Presently those who had been there longest arose to go, and their place was speedily taken by other arrivals; that soon let the Haynes and Merriams out, and as they tripped away homeward each seemed to draw a long breath.

"Won't you come in and sit a little while?" begged Mrs. Hayne, as they neared the captain's gate.

"Not to-night, thanks," was Merriam's reply, as he felt Floy's prompt twitch at his sleeve. She was still nervous. She wished to get away and to bear him with her.

"Merriam," said Hayne, "I admire your nerve, perhaps I should say your cheek."

"Well, it was rather a trying moment," said Merriam gravely. "Florence would rather be struck than kissed by her, and I feared she could not avoid showing it."

"Well, you created a diversion, certainly," said Hayne. "Good-night, if you must go." But Mrs. Hayne did not speak until they were out of sight. She was anxiously watching Florence, who, beyond a barely audible "Good-night," had not uttered a word.

"Lawrence," said she finally, "that may have been a stroke of *finesse* on Mr. Merriam's part, and may have created a diversion, as you say, and distracted attention from Floy, but—*she* didn't like it."

Some of the fair widow's calls were returned almost immediately, the Merriams' among the first, although the Merriams were not among the first to welcome her arrival. As luck would have it, Merriam was out on some troop duty. Mrs. Merriam saw her coming, accompanied by Mrs. Grafton, and fairly flew upstairs to her room instead of first giving instructions to her servant, as an older soldier of society would have done. In consequence the Chinaman admitted her caller to Floy's pretty parlor, and went in search of the lady of the house. Mrs. Grafton seated herself in an easy-chair, but Fanny flitted rapidly from

point to point, scanning pictures, books, and bric-a-brac. "John" presently reappeared, smiling vacuously.

"No can see. She sick, velly," he sturdily reported.

Mrs. Grafton looked concerned; Mrs. Mc Lane annoyed.

"I'm sure I saw her on the tennis court not an hour since," she muttered to her hostess, as, after proper expressions of sympathy and regret, they regained the roadway.

"Well, she hasn't been looking well for some days," said Mrs. Grafton, "and it's quite possible she *is* ill."

The schoolmates had been housed together only a few days before Mrs. Grafton became convinced that Fanny's devotions were rapidly waning, that with recovering health and bloom and spirits the crying need for the one dear friend to lean on had vanished. Less and less grew the hours of confidential chat. More and more was the late disconsolate widow becoming interested, not to say absorbed, in the details of garrison life. Freeman, formerly of the —th, but now a squadron commander

at Sedgwick, remarked that the lady was "beginning to take notice uncommonly early," and Muntorn, with whom she was quite ready to walk and even to visit the tennis court, was heard to ask if they never had such things as half-mourning hops. Whittaker, who was sulky about something and preternaturally stately as a consequence, reminded him that Mrs. McLane was still in deep mourning, —*full* mourning—to which a cynic in shoulder-straps who happened to be present replied that he only wished that other fulls could be as lightly worn. "She may have been in the depths of woe before she left Chicago, as Mrs. Grafton declares she was," said Mrs. Buxton, a lady with years of experiences, "but she's bravely over it soon enough. She'll be dancing next." And this unchristian, uncharitable remark was called forth by the sight of the lady going to ride with Whittaker—Whittaker, who at first could hardly be induced to call, and who now could hardly be induced to believe it time to go.

And of course before she had been at the post a week everybody knew that this was the

woman to whom Merriam was at least believed to be engaged two years before, and that added to the thrilling interest of the situation. For a little while it had been quite a problem how to entertain her. She couldn't go to dances or dinners. She could perhaps ride and play tennis, but tennis she did not care for. Riding was unpleasant because there were no winding wood roads, no elastic turf. The mesa was pebbly or sandy by turns, the cañon narrow, the roads dusty. Ladies' lunches, very, very quiet and informal, she consented to attend, but she did not care for lunches. The women presently declared she did not care for women.

The men, especially Minturn and Whittaker, had early become devoted to her, and there could be no doubt of her powers of fascination. The gunner and the trooper grew cold and constrained in their manner toward each other, and Whittaker quit going, as go he used to day and night, to Hayne's or Merriam's. The colonel's wife, dying to be hospitable, had urged a little, quiet, home dinner. "Just yourself, your friends the Graftons and Merriams, and, say, Mr. Minturn." Mrs.

Grafton assured the kind army woman that Mrs. McLane would not think of accepting. Mrs. McLane amazed her hostess by eventually saying yes.

Since the Tuesday evening of their call, not once had the Merriams held conversation with the widow. She called, as has been seen, and Mrs. Merriam had to be excused. Mrs. Merriam used to love tennis, but quit the game as soon as Mrs. McLane began coming to the court. Mrs. Merriam, who used to love to ride with Randy, had discontinued it a day or two after that alleged illness, as though to carry out the illusion, but by the Thursday she again appeared in saddle and galloped out upon the mesa by her husband's side. Returning they met Mrs. McLane just starting out with her gunner friend, and the ice had to be broken. The stylishly habited widow beamed on both, begged Floy to let her know at what hour they could ride next day, as she adored it of all things, and next day Floy's horse was reported "dead lame," and she would ride no other. When Mrs. Colonel's invitation came for that utterly unlooked-for



"Staying into vacancy as she did so."

dinner, the Merriams were cornered, for Floy, though looking sallow and heavy-eyed now, was not really ill and could urge no excuse. Garrison dinner "bids" must be answered as promptly as those in city life. "We've got to go, dear," said Merriam calmly, "so send our acceptance."

"I won't go," said Floy to herself, as she penned and signed the little note, and when Saturday came she was too ill to leave her bed. Mrs. Hayne came to minister to and sit with her. The Freemans were bidden instead, and Mrs. Freeman could have stamped her pretty foot in vexation, for neither she nor her lord thought it the proper thing for Mrs. McLane to be going to dinners so early in her widowhood; besides, there were other reasons.

The dinner came off, however, and was a dismal feast with a dramatic conclusion.

As has been shown, only twice had Mrs. McLane had speech with Merriam during the seven days, and both times it was in presence of his wife. The Graftons, Haynes, and Freemans were delighted with him as a consequence, and rejoiced in secret over her. But

not a whit did the widow show disappointment or discomfiture. She was amply entertained, apparently, with the increasing devotions of Minturn and Whittaker, and the latter spent two miserable hours this Saturday evening in jealous contemplation of his own outcast lot and Minturn's presumable bliss. Yet the colonel could not have both to dinner, so Mrs. Colonel was allowed to decide, and her preference was for the artilleryman. The Graftons went with rather bad grace, Mrs. Grafton warning her guest that the whole garrison would be talking of her inconstancy, but, as Ned Parry remarked on a previous occasion, Fan had had her own way ever since she cut her first tooth, and did not propose to be ruled now.

"Almost the last words Mr. McLane whispered," said she indignantly, "were to implore me not to waste my youth in vain lamentation. 'Life is too short to be spent in tears,' were his very words," and evidently the widow was here in full sympathy with the expressed or reported views of the dear departed. She went. She looked uncommonly

pretty in a gown of deepest, most sombre, and most expensive crape. She sat at the colonel's right, and made eyes at him all through dinner, leaving Minturn on her right to sulk and scowl and seek comfort in the commandant's champagne. Fanny herself partook not too sparingly of this seductive fluid, and was sparkling with animation and good spirits when, just before coffee was served—just as the trumpets were sounding tattoo out on the moonlit parade, a servant came and whispered to the master of the house.

"Tell him I'm at dinner and can't see him now."

The servant vanished, then reappeared, bent and whispered again.

"Tell him I'm at dinner and *won't* see him now," said the colonel, not unwilling to impress on his fair guest the idea of his professional importance and personal force. The servant bent and whispered again, whereat the colonel changed color, and glanced up uncertainly in the troubled face of the messenger, then as uncertainly around the table, his eyes only for an instant meeting those of his guest.

"Will you excuse me a moment, my dear?" he said to his wife, and left the table and the room.

Conversation went on somewhat constrainedly. Mrs. McLane, intent on fascinating the colonel, had rather ignored the rest. Minturn was plainly in the sulks, and Mrs. Colonel, with anxiety in her eyes, was plainly listening to the hurried talk in the outer room. Presently in came the servant. Would Captain Grafton please join the colonel in the parlor, and, wondering, Grafton went.

"It's that dreadful telegraph operator," said Mrs. Colonel, in a low, troubled tone. "It's some bad news. Indian outbreak, probably, or he'd never be so insistent."

Then all conversation seemed to drag, and people only spoke in monosyllables or hazarded some guess as to what could be the matter.

But it wasn't Indians. It wasn't warfare. It was only the soldier telegrapher at the post, who bore with him a message which the operator at the Junction had received positive instructions from the Eastern manager to deliver

at once and report delivery and get an answer. It was for Mrs. McLane. So there was nothing for it but to call her, and with sudden panic in her eyes she hurried into the parlor, shrank for a moment from the proffered dispatch—then, with an effort at self-control, took it, tore it open, read with dilating eyes, lifted her hand to her face as though in bewilderment and dismay, staring into vacancy as she did so, and then suddenly, without a moan, without a sound from her lips, went down in a limp heap upon the bear-skin rug whereon she stood, and the ladies rushed to—but could not—revive her.

Full half an hour they labored over her. The messenger had dashed for the doctor and brought him to the scene. Grafton had rescued the paper just as it seemed about to flutter into the fireplace, folding and stowing it away in his coat-pocket, and not until after ten did she seem to recover consciousness, not until near the sounding of taps could they bear her home, and then the messenger came back. The operator at the Junction said they must have report of the receipt of the mes-

sage, and some answer: this was imperative. Grafton appealed to the doctor. The doctor said Mrs. McLane was only semi-conscious and could answer nothing. "She is your guest, man. Read the dispatch and reply as best you can. Whatever its contents, they have shocked her seriously."

And so finally Grafton read the message and could fathom only a portion of its meaning.

"Arrested, Chicago. Your uncle stricken—paralysis. You will be summoned. Secure papers, otherwise lose everything.

"C. M."

CHAPTER IX.

THREE days after the colonel's dinner, Mrs. McLane was pronounced sufficiently well to take the open air, but did not look sufficiently well, in her own opinion, to take the hint, nor did Mrs. Grafton too eagerly urge. By this time the hostess was fully convinced that Fanny was far from being the frank, confiding creature she had pictured herself to be; that she had come to Sedgwick with other purpose in view than that of seeking the sympathy and counsel of her erstwhile schoolmate; that she was concealing from her, to whom she once longed to unbosom her every thought, some vital and thrilling circumstance, and, worst of all, that Captain Grafton now knew what it was, and wouldn't tell. This perhaps, was almost unpardonable. In vain had Mrs. Grafton insinuated, inquired, insisted, and finally implored. Her husband was gentle, but obdurate.

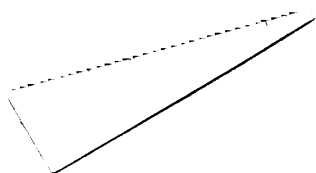
"I know nothing, Harriet," he simply said. "I do, perhaps, conjecture, but all I conjecture is derived from that dispatch, the contents of which should be seen and known only by your friend the—your friend and once-upon-a-time bridesmaid. If she choose to tell you, well and good, but I cannot."

But he told Mrs. McLane what he had read without telling what he conjectured, and then furthermore told her what he had done—wired to Aunt Charlotte that her niece was prostrated by the receipt of her dispatch, and might not be able to reply for several days, so Aunt Charlotte was existing without further knowledge of the condition of her niece as placidly, let us hope, as was her niece without further knowledge of the condition of her uncle.

It was on this third day when the doctor left, after saying Mrs. McLane ought to go and take a drive or a ride, that Grafton wrote to her a few words reporting that he had read Aunt Charlotte's dispatch and replied to it as above stated. This note he sent in by Annette. Mrs. Grafton was receiving sympathizing callers at the moment, and the captain



"intently Merriam eyed the Captain's face"



bade Annette say that if he could be of any further service Mrs. McLane should let him know. Presently Annette returned with a note.

"I am so distracted," it said, "so friendless, I do not know what to do. You are the only man upon whose counsel I can depend, but even that is denied me, for Harriet has turned cold and unkind. Because I cannot tell her the secrets of others she thinks me false to our old friendship, and she has changed to me so much that were I able to travel I should go at once, only how could we explain? Oh, I long to tell you the whole story, but I *cannot*! I *must* not! and I must not do that which might increase her suspicion—" But here Grafton began to frown angrily. He read no further, though there were half a dozen lines on the following page, but tossed the whole thing into the open fireplace, tramped right up-stairs and tapped at the guest-room door.

"Can you come to the door a moment, Mrs. McLane?" he asked.

There was the sound of sudden rush and rustle within, then her light footfall, the clack

of the door-knob, and her voice, low and sweet.

"You startled me so," she said, through the inch-wide aperture that appeared, but left her invisible. "I dreaded that it was another telegram. Oh, I'm not fit to be seen, but——"

"I don't w—l don't need to see you, Mrs. McLane," said he stoutly. "We can converse perfectly well, as Annette is below stairs. All I wish to say is this: if I can be of service—in sending off any letters or dispatches to your friends, command me. But really, Mrs. McLane, there is no need of telling me anything about the matter."

"But I have to, Captain Grafton," and the door opened a bit wider. "I *must* have your advice. I *must* do something right away, and you're the only one who can help me."

"Then I'll ask Harriet to come here at once," said he, and, suiting action to words, started for the stairway.

She rushed out after him, dishevelled, pallid. "Oh, I cannot tell Harriet," she cried.

"Then, Mrs. McLane, you cannot tell me."

For a moment she looked at him in amaze.

"I will wire for your lawyer, Mr. Parry," he went on calmly. "He can advise what I probably could not."

"He cannot advise as you can, captain. It's a matter he knows nothing about. I've got to see Mr. Merriam, and he avoids me even worse than you do, than—in fact everybody does now that I'm in deep trouble," she wailed.

"I am sure Mr. Merriam will come to you if there is anything of importance," said Grafton gravely. "I will see him at stables, and the call is sounding now."

"Oh, not to-day—not to-day. To-morrow perhaps, but not to-day. I really cannot see him just yet. I'm so unstrung—and he mustn't let her—his wife, know. She'll never rest till she's worried it all out of him."

"He *will* let his wife know," said Grafton calmly, "and is wise in so doing, but she will not be apt to make inquiries." Then he turned and left her.

There were two restless and unhappy men at Sedgwick now—gunner and trooper—Min-turn and Whittaker, and, each at his appropriate stable, managed to intercept the troop

commander on the way to his own, each importunate for tidings of the fair invalid, each resentful of his indifference and unpitying response. Grafton was a warm friend where he liked, but an unbeliever and a cynic where he did not, and Grafton believed that he had fathomed Fanny McLane's shallow nature and secret purpose, and was intolerant of her to the verge of rudeness. He loved his wife. He mourned the semi-deception in which she had indulged in having, against his wishes, brought her former friend within their gates. But now he looked upon Harriet as being quite sufficiently punished, and equally willing that Mrs. McLane should take herself elsewhere. If, therefore, Merriam would see her and do—or refuse to do—that which she demanded of him, Grafton felt that he might speed his parting guest and relieve not only his own but his fair wife's shoulders of a heavy load. He was late reaching stables, a fact burly old Buxton would be quick to notice and as quick to rebuke. He had delayed only a minute or two after the sounding of the call, because he wished to have his interview over and done

with. The men of his troop were already leading out as he came in sight of the long row of yellow-washed rookeries that passed for stables, and it annoyed him to be hailed on the way, one after another, by these two admirers of so much that he couldn't admire at all. Then, as luck would have it, the lieutenant-colonel was the next to accost him and to remark that he was five minutes late, which wasn't so, but couldn't be contradicted, and Grafton was gritting his teeth when he reached his troop. He was in no mood to talk diplomatically with Merriam just then, and knew it, and was thankful that the lieutenant was still another stable beyond, when who should appear, walking rapidly back from the bank where the horses were watering, than Merriam himself. Seeing inquiry in the captain's eye, he stepped quickly toward him.

"My wife isn't feeling at all well," he explained, "and I'm excused in order to return to her."

"Nothing serious, I hope," said Grafton. There, at least, was a woman he approved of.

"Nothing that I can understand, or the doc-

tor either," said Randy, anxiously. "She hasn't been like herself for several days, and gets worse instead of better. I don't like to be away from her, although Mrs. Hayne is there a great deal, bless her!"

"I'm sorry—I'm doubly sorry, Merriam," said Grafton, uncomfortably, "for I was on the point of asking you to come over and see Mrs. McLane about a matter which is giving her deep anxiety."

Merriam's face began to darken at once, but he said no word.

"Randy, continued Grafton, after a moment's embarrassed pause, "I know it's asking a great deal more than I should care to do were I in your place, and I wouldn't ask it if I didn't think it might do good for all and do harm to none. You heard of her sudden prostration the other night?"

"Yes—but——"

"Do you know—have you any idea of the cause?"

"Not the faintest—No! I can't say that. She got a telegram, I heard."

"She did, and an answer was demanded and

I had to read it and reply that she was prostrated and couldn't answer herself, perhaps for days. I have no right to tell you what was in the message, but she seems to need to see you. She says to-morrow—I say to-night."

For a moment no answer came. At last, with evident effort, Merriam spoke.

"I had promised myself never to see her alone. It is due to my wife, if not to me. You know the relations that existed. Now Mrs. Merriam does not—like your guest."

"Neither do I," interrupted Grafton stoutly, "and I've an idea she'll go after she's got what—information you can give her."

And now Merriam's face began to lose its dark look and to grow suddenly pale. "Do you mean that this telegram has made—has anything to do with her wish to see me?"

"Everything, Merriam, according to my belief, and if I could tell you what it said I think you would not refuse her."

Intently Merriam eyed the captain's face as though burning with eagerness to read his full meaning.

"Very well, I will come right after retreat.

Surely five minutes ought to be enough," he said at length, and then went thoughtfully homeward.

But retreat parade came within so short a time after Grafton's return to his quarters that his message to Mrs. McLane covered that lady with consternation. What! Meet Randy Merriam when she had less than thirty minutes in which to dress! It couldn't be thought of! When Merriam called, Mrs. Grafton fluttered down, with flushing cheeks and indignant eyes. "I'm *so* sorry, Mr. Merriam, but really Mrs. McLane says she is so far from well again this evening that she cannot see any one. She has gone back to bed, but begs that you will come in at noon to-morrow. How is dear Florence? I should have been to see her, but I am tied hands and feet."

And Randy went angering back to Floy's mutely inquiring eyes. "What can I do to cheer you to-night, my darling?" he whispered, as he bent over to kiss her. "Is Mrs. Hayne coming back?"

Florence was lying on the sofa in her pretty room aloft, and Merriam knelt at her side, tak-



Merriam knelt at her side.

ing her passive hand in his and stroking gently the curls that shimmered about her white temples. The smile with which she greeted him was very wan and flitting.

"She said she would, after a little. I told her you'd be in right after parade, but—" and the "but" had a mournful tone to it.

"I had to stop a moment on the way, dear. A matter I promised to attend to," and again he bent and laid his lips upon her brow, then pressed them to hers. Time was, and only a few days gone by, when she used to meet that fond caress with a kiss as fond, as lingering as his own. Now she lay there patient, unresponsive. Something prompted him to pass his arm underneath her neck and to draw her head to his breast, and she let herself go, unresisting, but her cheek did not nestle happily, confidently, as was its way. Her big, pathetic eyes were downcast, even averted.

"I wish I knew some way to gladden your a bit, my Brownie," he murmured, using for almost the first time her father's own fond pet name for her, and he was startled beyond measure at the result. One instant her

face lighted as with sudden, radiant joy, then quivered all over with pent-up emotion. Then the pretty mouth began to twitch and the lips to tremble, and then despite every effort she turned back to her pillow and burst into a passion of tears, great sobs shaking her slender frame from head to foot.

"Florence! Florence!" he cried, in utter dismay and trouble. "What is it, sweetheart? What is it, my pet, my precious? Ah, don't turn from me like that. You are not well, my own, or you would not break my heart by shrinking from me. What can I have said to so distress you?" And now he would take no denial, but had clasped his arms about her and drawn her to his breast again, and began kissing away her tears and striving to check her sobbing. It was useless.

"Oh, let me cry—*let me cry!*" she pleaded. "It's—it's what I need."

And so in pain and bewilderment he yielded to her wish and strove to content himself with murmuring soft, soothing words and holding her close to his heart, and at last the storm of tears seemed drifting away and she could

she looked one instant into his eyes and began:

"Do you think—could we—go back to the—cantonment for—just a little while?"

"Why, Floy, darling, we've only just come from there."

"I know. And yet—and yet—oh, it seems months—years since—since then!" And now the sobs again became uncontrollable, and in dread and distress he sprang up to call the servant and bid him go for Mrs. Hayne and the doctor. Florence protested, even implored, but to no purpose. The message was sent, and before many minutes both were there.

The medico looked perturbed when he came down-stairs; talked about low nervous condition; said that air, sunshine, cheerful companionship were what she really needed, etc., etc. She'd been housing herself too much of late. He would send over some sedatives from the hospital; and then he bustled out, and was glad to get away. Then came an orderly with the colonel's compliments, and would Mr. Merriam step over to the office a minute; and, glancing out across the parade, Randy was

surprised to see that bright lights were shining from the windows at headquarters and there were signs of unusual life and stir about the infantry barracks. Quickly he mounted the stairs and again knelt by the side of his young wife. She was quieter now, but evidently weak from the violence of her emotion, if from no other cause. Smiling sympathetically, Mrs. Hayne arose from her place near the head of the sofa that he might come closer and fold Florence in his arms, as she felt sure Florence wished to be folded, and Randy did come nearer and took the slender hand in his and spoke tenderly and fondly, and bent again and kissed the pale forehead, lingeringly, and all this Florence seemed to accept without other notice than silence and submission. Mrs. Hayne gazed with swiftly changeful expression. This was something utterly new, utterly unlooked for. What could have occurred to turn Florence Merriam, fondest, happiest of wives, into this limp, unresponsive creature? Surely it could not be that there lingered one remaining doubt of Randy now. He had ignored so utterly, so successfully, the wiles of

the coquette to whom he owed allegiance a year gone by. She heard him murmur, "I'll be back very soon, dearest," saw the sudden upward sweep of the white eyelids and the miserable, questioning look in the dark brown eyes. "The colonel has sent for me to attend him at the office," he explained, and the eyelids drooped again. Then he pressed his lips to hers and they answered not at all. Then he rose, and with deep concern in his manly face turned to go. "It is so good of you to come to us," he said to Mrs. Hayne. "I should be at a loss without you. I'll hurry back."

But his last look as he left the room was for Florence, whose eyes followed him only until his turned again to her. Then they drooped again.

"Floy, dear," said Mrs. Hayne, after a moment of thought, "I'm going to ask you something."

The girl held up her white hand, and, as though listening, said "Wait."

They heard Randy in the hall below, as he **threw his cape over** his shoulders and hastened

out, heard him go bounding down the steps, out through the gateway, and then across the hard gravel of the road. Then as his footfalls died away, Mrs. Hayne knelt where he had knelt the moment before.

"Floy, dear, it isn't possible you think he still cherishes any feeling except of pity or contempt for—that woman? I never saw anything more perfect than his devotion to you—his avoidance of her."

For answer, with sudden force the young wife seemed to tear herself from the touch of the friendly hand, the sound of the gentle voice, and, burying her face in her arms, turning her back upon her consoler, moaned aloud.

"Oh, Floy, Floy, my little friend! You must not doubt him. Never distrust him again. Why! he will not even go near her. He will not see her—speak with her, and I never heard such love and tenderness in his voice as when he speaks to you."

Then, as though stung, Florence whirled upon her, and with dilated, burning eyes, and a hot flush overspreading her face, with lips close set as though to beat down the tremors

that strove for the mastery, answered with startling vehemence:

"But *I* have—it's when he calls to her—talks to her in his sleep!"

Then Mrs. Hayne sprang up, aghast. One moment she stood gazing incredulously down at Florence, a world of sorrow and pity in her eyes. Then, with her hand to her ear, cried "Hark!" and hastened to the window.

Far out across the still, starlit level of the parade a trumpeter was sounding officers' call

CHAPTER X.

THAT night the Riflers, seven companies, were whirled away by special train to the rescue of the railway shops and roundhouses at Cimmaron Springs, a hundred miles to the north. One of those unaccountable manias that prompt men to appropriate other people's property had seized upon the employees of the road. The Valley Division had been forced to abandon all trains, and it was only a question of time, said the ringleaders, when the Mountain Division would follow suit. Passenger and cattle, fruit and freight trains were blockaded. The mails, sent through at first with a single car, were presently belated, then blocked entirely, and Uncle Sam, who had been showing his teeth for twenty-four hours, now showed his hand. In the old days of Sedgwick it was the cavalry that was perpetually being hustled off on the warpath, leaving the infantry to hold the fort, but of late the Indians had kept the

peace and the cavalry the post. Then came the sudden outbreak of trouble on an Eastern road, the swift assurance of sympathy from brethren in the West, and then a strike that speedily established the fact that there were still savages in the valley of the Bravo, for men who tried to stand to their duty were kicked and battered into pulp, and helpless women and children were burned out of house and home.

The colonel was in no wise eager to go on any such mission. He kept at the metaphorical front, but the actual rear, of his men, secure in the precaution that cool-headed Captain Hayne was forward on the pilot of the engine. If the trestle work were sawed away or bridges burned at inconvenient points, Hayne would not be apt to let the train stumble into the pitfall. It was nearly dawn before the special reached Santa Fé Junction, but the Riflers marched thither soon after midnight, leaving many weeping wives at home. They had not the stoicism of those women long schooled in such calamities—the ladies of the cavalry.

Buxton succeeded to the command of the post and its garrison, now made up of one big squadron of the —th, four troops, and Captain Blinker's battery of mounted artillery, and what fairly pestered Buxton was why the colonel should have sent for Mr. Merriam within ten minutes after the dispatches began coming in just after retreat, and Merriam wouldn't tell.

The first dispatch was from department headquarters, and bade the colonel hold his entire regiment ready for instant duty and a journey by rail. Bux was with him when it came, and together they had gone to the office. Then was handed in another, which the colonel read but did not pass over to his second in command. On the contrary he thought a bit and sent for Mr. Merriam, and took him to one side and had a conversation with him of five minutes' duration that was inaudible to everybody else. Bux did catch a word or two, but could make of it nothing that did not stimulate his curiosity. "Killed," "Mescalero Mountains," "written statement"—"McLane—only twenty-three," were some of them, and when

he took the commanding officer's desk the next day, he ransacked it to find that dispatch, supposing it to be something official. It was only semi-official, said the operator. It came from department headquarters, but was addressed to the colonel personally, not in his capacity as post-commander, consequently it was not filed, and Bux couldn't find it.

The guard had to be reduced, and Buxton gave orders accordingly—a sergeant, three corporals, twelve sentries for four posts, and the inevitable and indispensable orderly for the commanding officer being all now authorized, since both battery and troop commanders had to keep up their stable guards. But Buxton insisted on a lieutenant as officer of the guard, and, as luck would have it, the man directed to relieve the infantry sub starting off with his regiment was Randolph Merriam.

He had hastened home to let Florence know it was the Riflers, not the cavalry, that were summoned this time, and instead of finding her somewhat tranquillized was distressed to see traces of continued, if not greater, agitation. Mrs. Hayne, of course, had been hurried home.

Florence had left the sofa and was nervously pacing the little room. He heard her rapid footsteps as he let himself in at the door below, but as he bounded up the stairs she hurried to the window and stood leaning against the sash, her back toward him as he entered.

Closing the door and hastening to her, Merriam took her in his arms and turned her face to his. It was hot and flushed. The eyes were still red with weeping, the lids swollen and disfigured.

"Why, Florence, dear," he began, in tones of mingled reproof and distress, "what can have happened to so disturb you? We do not go. It is only the Riflers this time."

For one moment there was silence, then a sudden outburst:

"I wish we did go. I wish to heaven I had never again seen this hateful, hateful post—or else that *she* had not."

"She! Florence? Who?"

"The woman you went to see when I was out of the way after parade this evening—and dare not tell me."

"Florence! Florence!" he cried, in utter

amaze and distress. "Listen to me, dear," he pleaded, for she was struggling to release herself—"listen to me, child."

"Child?—I *am* no child! I was one, perhaps, when you came into my life—when I married you. But not now—not now, Randy—I'm a woman with a burning, bleeding heart. Why should you go there? Why should you hide it from me?"

"You were ill and wretched. I knew you could not bear her. Grafton asked me to come on a matter entirely of business."

"Oh! *what* business have you to have business of any kind with her—now?"

"I do not yet know, Florence," he answered, slowly releasing her, and his tone changing to one in which pain and reproach were mingling now. "I have not seen her; indeed she refused to see me."

"You said Captain Grafton urged you to come, What right had he if she didn't mean to see you?"

"That remains to be explained, Florence. I have had no time to inquire. Indeed, I have not felt sufficient interest. Mrs. Grafton said

the lady had declined to see anybody, and had gone back to bed, prostrated again, possibly. I was most anxious to come to you, my wife, little dreaming what welcome was in store for me. Florence, dear, is it possible—is it credible that you have let that poor woman come as a torment into your life and make you so unjust to me? O my little soldier girl, is this just to either of us?"

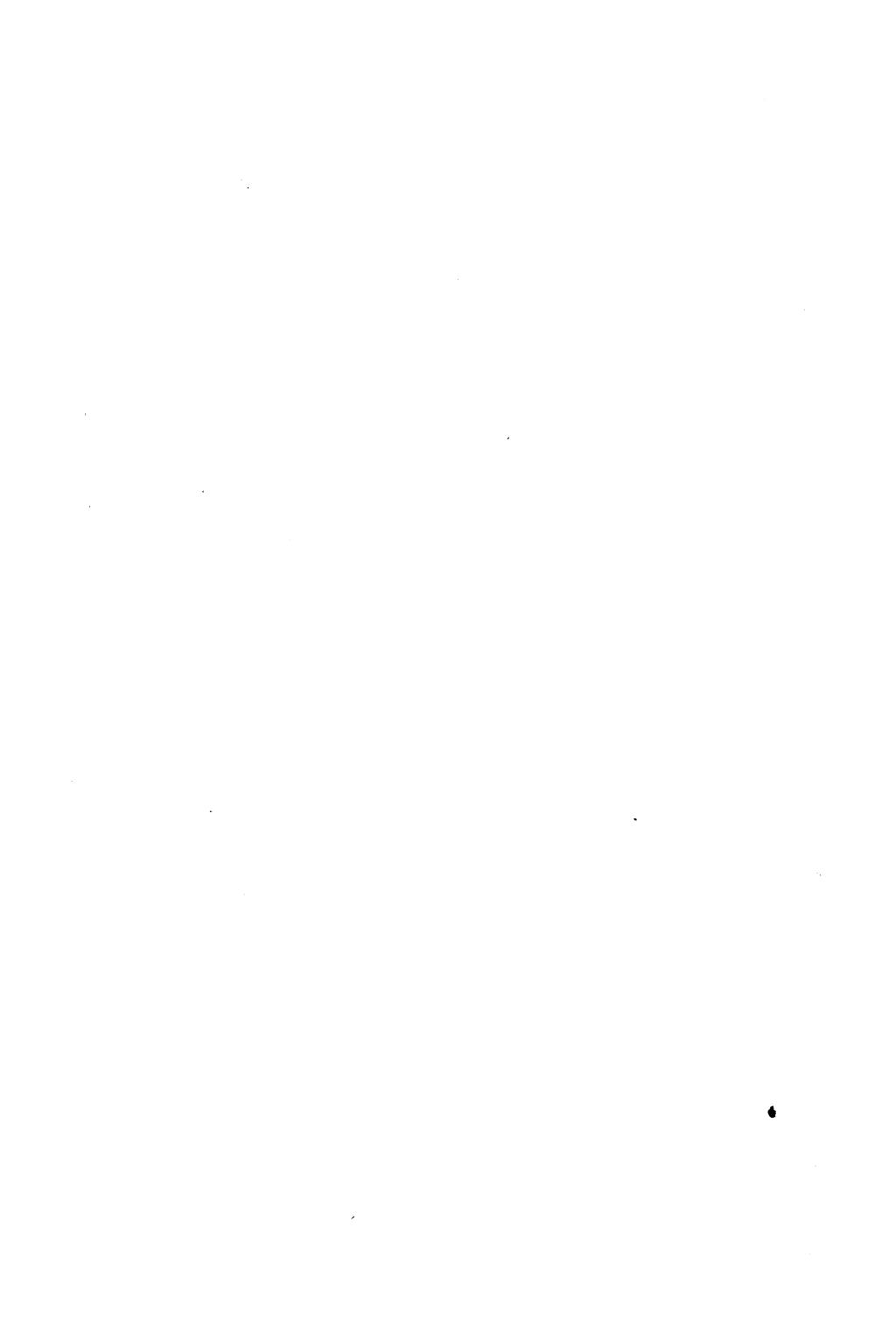
"Tell me this!" she demanded, suddenly facing him and looking into his troubled eyes. "Is there any business—*can* there be any reason why she should wish to see you—alone?"

Merriam hesitated. "Florence," he began, "there are matters sometimes made known to a man that he must divulge to no one. I do not know what she desires of me, but I believe it is her wish to learn all I know about that poor fellow who was killed up the Mescalero last June—nothing else."

"And needs a private interview with her rejected lover for that purpose!" she interrupted, her eyes flashing anew. The child was indeed a woman. "Oh, I hate her! I *hate* her!" she cried, throwing herself passion-



"Can there be any reason why she should wish to see you—alone?"



ately upon the sofa, and then Merriam cried "Hush!" for some one was knocking at the door.

It was the servant, their oblique-eyed Chinaman, with a note. "My knockee tlee times," he grinned. "All time talkee—talkee; no listen."

It was a brief summons to relieve Lieutenant Henry in command of the guard, at once. Henry had to go with his regiment.

"Mrs. Hayne is coming back, is she not?" he queried of Florence, but had to repeat the query twice. She only shook her head.

He waited a moment. "Listen, Florence, dear," he presently said, as he bent compassionately over her. "I am ordered on guard at once, and must go to relieve Henry. Even though I cannot tell you what Mrs. McLane wishes to see me about, this I will tell you, dear. If I must see her, you shall know it first—from me, and not hear of it through some meddling gossip."

He was wondering as he walked away who could have told his wife he had called at Grafton's and asked for Mrs. McLane. He was too

proud to inquire. He had kissed her gently, forgivingly, as he said to himself, before coming away, and promised that he would be with her again if only for a few minutes before the signal for lights out. He found Henry swearing with impatience, as the youngster had a "raft" of preparations to make, and it was very late, nearly eleven o'clock, before he had re-established the sentry posts as ordered by the new officer of the day. The trumpets sounded "taps" to heedless ears, and the lights burned brightly in all the barracks, and the troopers who were not to go were chaffing the "dough-boys" who were, and so mixing up not a little in the work of preparation. He had seen Hayne a moment and had been told that Mrs. Hayne would run back to Florence again as soon as she had seen to the packing of his mess-chest and field-kit. The children were to be allowed to sit up and see the regiment off. Merriam supposed when taps came that by this time Mrs. Hayne was with Florence, but all the same he left the guard in charge of the sergeant a few minutes and hurried away over the parade and up to her room, and there he

found her lying almost as he had left her — face downward upon the sofa, and all alone.

Throwing aside his belt and sabre, Randy knelt by her side and strove gently to turn her toward him.

“Have you no welcome for me even now, my little girl?” he murmured. “Do you realize this is the first trouble that has ever come between us, and that I’m being very, very much abused for something that is no fault of mine?” His tone and manner were almost playful, despite a certain soreness at heart he could not quite ignore, but Floy resisted and was silent. “I have only a moment or two, my wife,” he presently continued, gravely and sadly. “You are soldier enough to know I should not be away from my guard even now, but my heart yearned over you, Florence, in your illness and distress, and I had to steal a moment. Won’t you come into my arms a little while, and let me kiss away the traces of those foolish tears?”

Ah, who knows how much her heart, too, may have been pleading with his pleading

voice at the moment, yet the devil of her jealous love kept rigid guard between them.

"I shall do very well," she answered, coldly. "Mrs. Hayne was here and I told her not to stay"—pause—then, "neither need you."

At first he could not believe his senses. The wild outburst of a few hours before was something easily accounted for in one so young and passionate, but this cold, repellant, remorseless refusal, this practical dismissal of his proffer of love, comfort, and caresses, this was something utterly unlike Florence. It not only amazed, it stung him, and rising slowly to his feet he stood one moment looking down at her in deep bewilderment, and with no little effort curbing his tongue and temper. The pretty wrapper she wore had become disarranged, and the one slender, alippered foot that projected from beneath its shelter was tapping nervously the foot of the sofa. Stifling a sigh, he looked about him, took from a neighboring chair a heavy shawl she had been using earlier in the day, and, carefully spreading it over her so as to cover even the rebellious foot, he quietly picked up

his sabre and as quietly walked to the door. There, turning about, he looked back at her. Without changing her position, she had calmly stripped off the shawl with her right hand and dropped it to the floor. The slippered foot was still beating its nervous, irreconcilable tattoo as he slowly descended the stairs.

She heard him let himself out into the night and the clank of the scabbard against the gatepost and the tramp of his cavalry boot as he crossed the road. He walked slowly, heavily now, not eagerly as he came. Florence heard and noted, and then her pride and resolution gave away, and again she wept bitter, bitter, yet not wholly penitent tears.

The waning moon was shining over the dim, far-stretching desert to the east, and a little torchlight procession was forming at the band barracks, as Merriam recrossed the parade. Each musician wore attached to his headgear a bright little lamp, its reflector so arranged as to throw the light full upon the sheet of music in the rack of his instrument. It was nearly time to form the regiment, and though the band was not to go, it meant to "play the boys on

to the cars," as the sergeant said. Whittaker, longing for excitement of some kind, had gone to Buxton and begged permission to turn out his troop, mounted, and escort the Riflers to the railway, and Bux said "no" with cheerful and customary alacrity. All the same all the post was up and mostly out of doors, thronging about the edge of the parade, when adjutant's call sounded and the two battalions came swinging out in full marching order—"campaign hats, blankets rolled, great-coats folded, haversacks, canteens, and crammed cartridge belts." There was but brief ceremony. The colonel whipped out his sword and gave "Column of fours," the rifles of the first company leaned to the right shoulder, the band burst forth into its liveliest strain, and, taking the lead, the baton-beating drum-major at its head, away they tramped for the southeast gate, and all Fort Sedgwick seemed to follow. The colonel spurred his way and jolted out in front of the band, his adjutant at his heels. The cadenced step and spirited music were kept up until the hospital corps at the rear of column was clear to the gate, then route step was

ordered. and then by twos and threes and little squads and parties the throng of escorts came drifting back, by far the larger portion veering off to the right and taking the pathway toward the barracks, while a long string of women and children, with a few attendant officials, kept the direct road, nearly westward, that ran in front of the main line of officers' quarters. Over at the guard-house the little handful of armed soldiers had stood watching from afar the formation and departure of the regiment, and now, spreading their blankets, were settling themselves for a brief nap before relieving the sentries now slowly tramping their posts, and Merriam, after one long look at the distant row, vainly seeking for the bright light that used to burn in her parlor window on previous nights when he was on guard, turned into the office of the guard-house with a heavy heart and a weary sigh, and sat himself down to look over the list of prisoners and the half-finished report.

The midnight call of the sentries had started as the Riflers marched away, but, between the music and the cheers, seemed to get no further

than the post of No. 2, and Corporal Mahoney had gone to see if 3 and 4 were all right. Silence was gradually settling down upon the moonlit garrison, although voices of women and children came floating faintly across the dim parade, and out under the spectral white flag-staff tiny sparks as of cigars could be seen, and low, gruff voices were heard in consultation. A moment or two more and the sentry on No. 1 was bidden to call off half-past twelve, and barely had he done so, and Merriam was straining his ears for the answering cry of the outlying posts, than a second time the sentry let loose his voice and challenged sharply, "Who comes there?"

"Commanding officer and friends," was the answer in Buxton's growl.

"Halt! Corpril the Guard—commanding officer and friends," answered No. 1, and Merriam sprang to his feet, while the corporal went bounding out to examine and receive the party.

"I want the officer of the guard," said Buxton, impatient of etiquette or formality as he bulged ahead. "Oh, Mr. Merriam, there must be at least a hundred of our men gone tagging



"Damn those infernal idiots!"

along with the 'doughboys' in hopes of a round of drinks at the Junction, probabiy. I want a mounted patrol to go in at once and herd 'em all back, otherwise some of them will be carried away on the train, sure as shooting. Just give your stable sentry orders to let a dozen horses out. I'll send Mr. Whittaker in command; he wanted to turn out and go as escort. Lots of your men are in there, I suppose, Captain Grafton," he concluded, as he turned to the silent officer at his side.

"Half a dozen, possibly, sir, though I doubt it. Do you wish horses and men from my troop? If not, sir, I'll retire."

"Yes, sir, I do. I want three men and horses from each troop—good men, too. If I send a squad from just one troop, those runagates will be down on just that one company and we'll be in hot water for a whole year."

Grafton silently touched his cap and turned away. Far off to the southeast there was a sound of cheering, and the band had struck up some rollicking quickstep, whereat old Bux gritted his teeth and swore anew. "Damn those infernal idiots! Do you know what'll

be the result of this? The regiment will get away on the train, and then that band instead of coming back will go to Miguel's saloon, and there they'll start a *baile* and have that whole greaser population in there drinking mescal and 'guardiente, and ripping and fighting until everybody's beastly drunk. I wont have it, sir!" and he glared at the officer of the guard as though he considered that silent official a co-conspirator. "I wont have it, I say. I wish Mr. Whittaker to start at once and round up the whole gang."

And with that he strode portentously away in the direction of headquarters, the orderly following with a grin. Corporal Mahoney came in from his round, reporting 3 and 4 all right and everything secure.

"But there's one thing, sir: No. 2 can't begin to see the length of his post, and with so many private horses in the little stables back of the row what's to prevent them beggars from town running off half a dozen head? Once across the mesa and into the Santa Clara country there'd be no catching them."

"We must take the chances," said Merriam,

briefly. "The commanding officer will not permit any increase of sentries."

Yet the corporal's warning made him think of his own favorite saddle-horse and Floy's pretty bay. She rode so well, so fearlessly, tirelessly, that one of his very first gifts to her had been this dainty little mare, swift and sure-footed as a greyhound, and about as wonderful a jumper, and Florence gloried in her and in the dashing rides they used to take. *They* didn't mind the lack of shaded bridle-paths. They scoured the plain full gallop, riding recklessly after the bounding jack-rabbits, and coming home all athrill and aglow with the glorious exercise. But of late the rides had become more sedate and slow and less frequent, and then when Mrs. McLane proposed being of the party Florence discovered Mignon to be suddenly lame, and had a shoe removed and a hoof poulticed, and Randy smiled but said nothing. Mignon was surprised, perhaps, but not Mr. Merriam. He was thinking of the unprotected condition of those stables back of officers' row where those gentlemen who owned private stock were required to keep theirs,

instead of, as had been customary under a previous administration, at the cavalry or quartermaster's corrals. The colonel of the Riflers had once been knuckle-rapped for allowing public forage to be fed to private "mounts" of some garrison ladies, and now he had his eyes open. The Freemans, Haynes, Graftons, and Merriams, as well as the doctor, all had private horses for ladies' use; so did certain others; and although every mounted officer could draw forage for two horses, not a peck or oats could he get beyond that, and when it came to forage for ladies' horses—animals never ridden or driven except by ladies, and too light for government service, the colonel drew the line at that entirely, and was sustained by a virtuous Congress.

So Randy had to buy forage for Mignon, and luckily forage was cheap, with all those ranches of Santa Clara close at hand. He had often thought how easy it would be for greasers—natural horse-thieves—to sneak in on that southern front of a dark night and make off with four or five favorite horses, and the colonel used to keep three sentries along there. Now

they had only one. "All the more reason for my keeping personal watch on that front," thought Randy, "and that will give me an occasional chance to look in on Florence."

One o'clock came, and the call had gone from sentry to sentry, thanks to the breathless stillness of the air, and the moon was climbing high, and Bux was still up and swearing. A "wire" came out from the Junction that the "special" would not be there for two hours, so the Riflers had stacked arms, unslung packs, and were snoozing or skylarking as suited their humor. The colonel had given permission for a dance at Miguel's. The band was playing, and there was jollity in the wind. Bux said he wouldn't have the cavalry mixed up in any such tomfoolery, however, and the patrol was saddled and ready to start. Grafton, coming back from his stable, where he had gone to personally see to the selection of the mounts required, stopped and drew Merriam to one side.

"I'm sorry for the needless trouble you took this evening, Merriam. I had hoped that Mrs. McLane would see you and have done with it.

Another dispatch came for her three hours ago, and it seems to have roused her to action. She was up and dressed in time to see the regiment off, and now, I presume, she's flirting with Whittaker. There are lights in the parlor. At all events the orderly hasn't found him, and Bux may send *you* after the stragglers in town."

"Then I reckon I'll start and make the rounds and get out of the way," said Randy. "By the way, captain, I hope your private stable is well secured. We have only one sentry on that whole front now, and that matched team of yours is a powerful temptation to Bravo horse-fanciers. I mean to make two or three trips around the row to-night."

"Well, then I can save you several hundred yards, Merriam," said Grafton, fumbling in his pocket. "Take the short cut through my yard. There are no private horses between me and the east end of the line, you know. Here's the key to the rear gate."

Merriam took it and thanked him heartily.

"I'll go to the corrals first," said he, "and then come over your way. Good-night."

The lights were still burning dimly in the parlor as Grafton reached his quarters, but the slender form of a woman stood between him and the door. It was Mrs. McLane, and she began at once.

"I have been waiting anxiously for you, captain. Dear Harriet has gone to her room tired out, and I thought Mr. Whittaker would never go—I fairly had to send him. Mr. Merriam is officer of the guard. Could I see him—could you take me to him for just a minute? If I can talk with him three minutes it will be ample, and I cannot rest now until I do."

Grafton was on the point of bidding her remember that she had refused a chance of talking with him earlier that night, but refrained. He looked back across the sallow, moonlit surface of the parade to where the oil-lamps were burning blearily in the guard-room. "He is not there," said he. "He has gone down to the corrals. But—a happy thought striking him—"in less than ten minutes he will be coming through here on his rounds. I gave him the key of our rear gate. It's warm and pleas-

ant out here. You might hail and halt him as he enters."

Meantime there had been a sore, sore hearted young wife farther up the row. As wrath and passion sobbed themselves away and the devil of jealousy wore itself out, and the thought of Randy's patience and gentleness and of all that Mrs. Hayne had said of his unflagging tenderness and love, poor Florence began to wonder if she had not angered him beyond repair. His last act had been one of fond, thoughtful care. He had spread the shawl over her and lingered over it as though he loved to touch her, mad, miserable, ugly, hateful as she had been, and she had spitefully thrown it off. She picked it up now and strove to arrange it as he had done, but could not. She arose and bathed her face and eyes, and gazed out over the now deserted parade. She had not even stirred when the Riflers marched away. She paced the floor again and felt that she was weak, and became conscious that she was most unromantically hungry, and then—Oh, heavens! how could she!—how could she have forgotten? Here was Randy on guard,

up all night, and never before since they came back from their wedding tour had she failed when he was officer of the guard to have a delightful little chafing-dish supper all ready for him at twelve o'clock, and he used to come over from his duties for half an hour and eat with such an appetite and praise her welsh rarebit, or her oysters, and then take her in his arms with such love and delight in his fond eyes, and here—and here it was one o'clock and she'd utterly forgotten it. Oh, poor Randy must be starving!

In ten minutes Mrs. Merriam had bundled up her dishevelled hair, donned some more becoming gown than the tumbled wrapper, and had bustled down-stairs and lighted the parlor lamp to signal Randy to come home and be fed and forgiven, and then she ransacked the cupboard and started her fire, and then peeped over toward the distant guard-room and saw no sign of his coming. She trotted through the kitchen and banged lustily at Hop Ling's door and bade him rise and go summon his master, but the menial answered not. He, too, had slipped away to the Junction—not so

much to see the Riflers off as to have a shy at fan-tan, and Florence was alone. Never mind. She had been born and reared in garrison. No one could teach her the ins and outs of post life. Why shouldn't she run across the wide, dimly lighted flat and surprise her darling at his desk, and bid him come home with her and let her twine herself about him, and have a happier cry as she told him how weak and wicked and cruel and hateful she had been, and beg to be taken back into his love and trust. Yes, yes, well she knew that he was too noble, too grand to treat her sternly, coldly, because of her tempestuous outbreak. It was all because she loved him so—loved him so that it was torture to think any other woman could claim or hold or even attract him. With brightening eyes, with bounding heart, she threw over her head and shoulders a light wrap and stepped out on the piazza. Somebody was coming across the parade—from the guard-house—even now. He was still too far away to be recognized, but as he halted one minute and turned as though to listen to the sentries just beginning to call half-past one.

the moonlight glinted on the steel scabbard, and she knew it must be Randy. Then he was coming to her after all, and she need not have to seek him and be the first to "make up," as she used to say in girlish days. The call went round with echoing ring, and then on came her lover husband again. How she loved that martial stride of his! How erect and strong and soldierly he seemed! How—why—he wasn't coming—straight to her. He had reached the flagstaff. There lay the beaten pathway right before his eyes and hers. He *must* see the bright lights of his home bidding him come and find love and welcome. But he had turned away—was walking, not toward the west end, but straight for the middle of the row, straight to where the Graftons lived—where—that woman lived.

But that meant nothing. Oh, no! Florence well knew that meant nothing. Had he not said only a little while before that never would he see or speak with her without coming first to his wife, his Florence, and letting her know? Yet, why should he go thither, at this hour of the night? That was not the way to the sentry

posts. Unconsciously she approached the edge of the piazza—she saw him reach the roadway—saw him cross it—saw him—Merciful God! could she believe her eyes?—saw him enter what must be the Graftons' gate and then become lost in the shadows of the row. Hardly knowing what she did, Florence sped madly down the steps, out through the gate and, almost running, down eastward along the walk. Nearing the Graftons', she pressed her hand to her heart to still its mad pounding, and as she came opposite the parlor window she noted that the lamps were burning dimly, late as it was. Could he have entered? Breathless, dazed, she clung to the picket fence for support, not knowing what to do next, and then the blood seemed to turn to ice in her veins, for somewhere, close at hand, just beyond those sheltering vines she heard voices, his voice and hers, low-toned, earnest, ah! passionate—for she heard her murmur "Oh, Randy, Randy!" and, stepping quickly forward, saw her just around the corner of the trellis, apparently clinging to his arm, the two dim figures seemingly linked together, blending in one

vague, indistinguishable, yet damning shape, and then all grew dark to her, as though a pall had been dropped from the starry heavens, hiding from sight the sin and woe of a reeling world.

CHAPTER XI.

"MRS. McLANE," Merriam was saying at the moment, interrupting the pleading, weeping woman who was clinging to his arm, "it is useless to talk of it. Had you let me know why you wished to see me, all the pain of this meeting could have been avoided. Every paper I had was given to Mr. Parry, your lawyer, months ago. I know less about the matter, probably, than you do; and now, forgive me, but I must go at once."

Almost forcibly he drew her clasping hands from his arm, and turning sharply and without another word to the cringing woman, hastened on through the narrow pathway that led between Grafton's cottage and that to the eastward, and presently emerged again into the moonlight at the back of the house, going straight to the captain's stable. For a moment his late companion stood there at the trellis, staring after him in mingled misery and in-

credulity. She had planned it well. She had marked his coming just as Grafton had said, had hurried down to the shadowy aisle between the quarters and halted him there—astonished at her daring. He would have walked a dozen miles that night rather than see her at all, but to meet her this way, to feel that he was trapped, made Merriam's blood boil with wrath. His voice, though, was stern and cold as he bade her say why she wished to see him. But her aim was to detain, to soften, to charm and then to plead, and she had a dreadful, dreadful story to tell and none to tell it to but him. Even then she was balked, for Merriam bluntly bade her omit the story, as he knew all he needed to know, and come to the point at once. What could she want of him? Advice—sympathy, she cried; and for advice he referred her to her lawyer—for sympathy she must not come to him. She must have some purpose in calling on him—what was it? And then it proved to be the packet with certain papers, given him by the young miner in the Mescalero. "It was turned over to your lawyer long ago," said Randy; and then she burst

into tears and said she was undone, and wailed, "Oh, Randy, Randy! what can I—what am I to do?" And he suggested gravely, courteously, but positively, that she should at once go indoors, while he went on his way.

His heart was bitter against her as he strode out beyond the fence line, and, after carefully inspecting the doors of Grafton's stable, he closed and locked the gate. He wished now more than ever to hurry on westward and enter his own little home and surprise Florence. With grateful eyes he had noted the parlor lights and interpreted them as indicating that she must be well over the unreasoning stage of this her first, and, he prayed God, her last, jealous trouble. He turned toward his own gate, intending only to glance at the other stables on the way and give the sentry additional orders; but when he got so far toward the western end of the row as to enable him to distinguish any object as big as a man he found to his vexation that there was no sentry there at all, and that he must retrace his steps and look for him toward the other end. It was a backward tramp of over three hundred yards, and he was



"Come right along."

irritated enough to feel like scoring the sentry when finally he came upon him.

"You shouldn't be here, sir," he began after the customary challenge and reply. "Where you are most needed is along toward the other end, where there are private horses in flimsy stables."

"I know, sir," said the soldier promptly, "but there's something amiss out there on the road toward town. I heard a scuffle and cries for help, and then a running down into the creek bottom. The corporal's gone out to see. I'm afraid there's been blood spilt, sir."

And even as they stood and listened, the still night air was split by the loud report of a carbine, echoed back from the opposite wall of the shallow narrow cañon. It was followed almost instantly by a cry for aid.

"Come right along " shouted Merriam to the sentry, and he sprang away in the direction of the alarm. "Never mind your post!"

A run of nearly four hundred yards, crossing diagonally the Junction road as they ran, brought the lieutenant to the edge of the

chasm, at a point where one could see some distance down the stream, the sentry panting several rods behind. The moonlight was faint, but still sufficient to enable him to make out the form of a man apparently crawling on hands and knees up the bank, while another lay motionless close to the water's edge. Over this latter Corporal Mahoney was bending, imploring in grief-stricken tones. Randy went bounding down the abrupt slope, sure-footed as a goat.

"What's the matter, corporal? What is it?"

"Brady, sir—stabbed to death, I'm 'fraid There was three of 'em on him, and more at poor Corcoran yonder—Mexicans all of 'em, and they lit out straight for that monte shack across the mesa. Their horses are there, I reckon. Look up, Brady, man, for God's sake! Here's the lieutenant come to help."

Merriam knelt, threw open the blue blouse and placed his hand over the heart, waited a moment and shook his head. His hand was dripping with blood as he drew it out. "All over with poor Brady, I fear," said he. "Run

quick. No. 2 followed me out. Tell him to hurry for the surgeon and send the litter from the hospital. Who fired?"

"I did, sir. I hoped to bring down one of the gang, but they were too far off," answered the corporal, as he was pulling himself up the bank.

Turning away from the stricken soldier and dabbling for a moment his hand in the stream, Randy called to Corcoran, the other victim, who was groaning and cursing alternately, and who presently burst into maudlin tears, demanding to be given a chance to stand up against the damned greasers again, that he might annihilate the entire party. It was evident that a subtler enemy had downed him even before the Mexican took hold. He was only slightly injured physically, but his money was gone. All Randy could extract from him was that there had been a game and he wouldn't pay up because the greasers were cheating, and they chased him and Brady, and overtook them and used their knives.

Buxton was still up and full of his project of sending the patrol for absentees and the band,

just as soon as the Riflers' train should have started. He heard the call for the surgeon and promptly turned out in person. The sleepy horses of the patrol were standing meekly and wonderingly at the guard-house when the distant shot was fired, and, borrowing one, the sergeant galloped out. When Bux appeared he borrowed another and one for the surgeon. Then, after hearing Merriam's brief recital, he ordered him to mount forthwith, take the entire patrol and gallop in chase of the greasers.

There was no difficulty in learning at the wretched shack at the edge of the reservation which way they had gone. Nine at least were in the party, and the hoof-tracks led away southwestward across the flat until they struck the line of the railway, two miles west of the Junction. Here there seemed to have been a brief halt, discussion, possibly a divide, and a split. Two horses had crossed the track and gone south; the others, veering westward, had "lit out" for the Santa Clara, and Randy Merriam, a trifle hungry now, was wishing with all his heart he had gone first to Florence and left

the inspection of the stables until afterward. It was somewhere about two o'clock when they started. The men were booted and spurred, but Merriam was in ordinary trousers, and the troop horse he rode was quick to find the spur was gone and slow to mind the heel. The McClellan saddle, too, with its upright pommel and cantle worried him after the ease of his own Whitman. When dawn came he was well-nigh ready to give up the chase after fording the Santa Clara and finding the trail had turned northwestward, when a sharp-eyed trooper swore he could see the quarry making for the foothills and not two miles ahead; so Merriam borrowed a single spur and pushed vehemently, vigorously on.

Then broad daylight came, and there could be no doubt they were gaining. The chase was hot. The pursued were tossing off saddlebags, riatas, and other detachable horse-furniture to lighten their weight, but they stuck to their guns and ammunition. Merriam's men were considerably strung out, not more than six being well up within supporting distance, when the fact that they were in range of the

greasers was demonstrated by the zip and sing of a bullet close alongside.

"That's business," muttered the trooper who rode close on his left rear. "Shall I try a shot, sir?"

Merriam shook his head. The situation had few points in its favor. Obedient to his orders to pursue and capture the gang, Randy had ridden hard, yet over many a mile had he asked himself the question—Suppose they resist arrest, what's to be done? He had no warrant. He was not even a deputy sheriff, not even the humblest constituent of a posse comitatus. If he or his men returned their fire and shot some of these unnatural naturalized voters and citizens, like as not an indictment for murder would be hanging over his head, if not hanging him in the course of a fortnight. True, there was no sheriff within seventy miles, and long before the civil authorities could be brought into play the murderers of Brady would be scattered all over the face of the earth. All the same, under the strict interpretation of the civil law, Lieutenant Merriam knew that he and his people had

no more business trying to arrest these renegades than they had to vote at a territorial election. In point of fact, like many another officer and man, soldier of Uncle Sam on the broad frontier, he was aware of the fact that even a horse-thief had more civil rights than the trooper. His expedition, therefore, in the eye of the law was nothing more nor less than a lawless dash, winding up in a possible free fight, and all against the peace and dignity of the people of New Mexico. Perhaps Buxton knew this too, but the orders he gave were peremptory, and Merriam never stopped to reply, reason why, or expostulate. But now when the renegades began to shoot the reasoning why had to be done. His men were hot for battle—so was he—but the nation expects of its officers that, no matter what the temptation, provocation, or exasperation, they keep cool heads and tempers, only shoot when the law permits, but then shoot to kill. No claim of self-defense could be allowed. They were the pursuing and therefore the attacking party, and though these Mexicans were followed red-handed, hot-footed, there could be no question

what a civil jury would say if any of their dingy hides were punctured by the balls of a brutal soldiery.

Zip—bang!—a second shot. Bing-g-g-g wrrrrr—bang! another, and Corporal Butts ducked his head and damned, and Trooper Mullen's charger squealed and lunged and kicked viciously with the seam of a bullet scathing his flank and ploughing the haunch. They were closing on the ruffians fast, then, and the temptation was overpowering. "I can't ride my men in to be shot down like dogs," growled Randy. "In for a penny, in for a pound. They started it anyway," he said to himself, then turned in saddle and waved high his forage-cap. "Close up! Close up, men!" he cried, meaning to draw rein, slacken speed a bit, and get all his party together before closing for action. The Mexicans were plainly winded. Their half-starved brutes had carried them under bloody spurring as far as they could and were now barely staggering along. What their riders dreaded was summary stringing up to the railway telegraph-poles if captured.



"Then turned in his saddle and waved high his hat."

Better die fighting, said the leader, and fight it was.

They were close to the entrance of a little ravine that set in among the barren slopes from the open ground to the east. All the way from the Santa Clara the ascent had been gradual but distinctly marked, and just as the foremost rider spurred around the shoulder of the hillside his panting broncho stumbled, went down, rolled helplessly over and lay there dead to kicks, curses, or blows. Three of the gang lashed onward, leaving their countryman to his fate, but two of them, better nerved, reined up, alighted, and, throwing themselves flat upon the ground, opened again a rapid and telling fire from their Winchesters. "Mira! el Teniente," was the word, linked with a savage Spanish curse that hissed from the black lips of the nearest, and in an instant Merriam became the target for the sharp fire of three magazine rifles, famous for their accuracy at no greater distance than the four hundred yards that now separated them. Almost before he could realize it Randy felt a sharp sting just at the outer edge of his bridle arm,

and knew that the blood gushed from the wound. Then all of a sudden his poor troop horse plunged heavily forward, and, groaning and struggling, went down in a heap, bearing his rider helplessly with him.

Two minutes more, as some of the men dismounted and with rapid and effective fire scattered the Mexicans to shelter within the ravine, Corporal Butts and a trooper succeeded in pulling Merriam free from the madly lashing, struggling, stricken brute, and then it was found that their pallid, speechless leader had received some serious injury. All the breath was knocked out of his body and the bridle arm was broken midway between the wrist and elbow. That ended the chase. Four or five men, it is true, took advantage of the fact that the lieutenant was knocked out to dash ahead and have a personal affair with the greasers, and later in the day, when, after a long, long ride, Trooper Mullen reached a friendly ranchman on the Santa Clara and had him send out his spring wagon for the wounded officer, these enthusiasts came drifting back, there was reason for belief that their ammunition had

not been entirely spent in vain. But it was a worn-out, used-up detachment, escorting a two-wheeled, improvised ambulance, that recrossed the Santa Clara late that afternoon and was met there by the assistant surgeon.

"I hope you saw Mrs. Merriam before you started," was Randy's faint greeting. "She wasn't much worried, was she? I tried to scrawl a line or two, and we made the messenger swear I was only lamed by the fall of the horse. You saw her—didn't you?"

"No—o," hesitated the doctor, "I didn't, Merriam. You see there wasn't time. You know how it is with old Bux. Steady with that stretcher there, steward. Just let me slip this support under the lieutenant's shoulder. You know Bux insisted on my starting instantly."

"But who took my note to her then? Who went to her?" persisted Randy. "It—it would never do to have her frightened—now—doctor."

"Oh, that'll be all right, Randy. Don't worry about that. I'm sure what she has heard hasn't hurt her. Mrs.—oh, yes, Mrs.

Hayne was over at your house when I came away."

"Thank God for that!" murmured poor Randy, as he took the drink the doctor gave him. "Heaven bless that dear woman, anyhow. Now get me home as soon as you can, old fellow."

But the whispered caution to the driver, given as the doctor reappeared and, mounting, rode alongside, was, "Go slow—slow as you can." Then to the hospital attendant who had ridden out with him he muttered, "Now ride ahead, Parks, and see if there's any news."



"Then Mrs. Buxton ventured to fire a shot."

CHAPTER XII.

WHEN Florence regained strength enough to move she crept slowly back to her little parlor, where the beacon lights that were to summon her husband were still faithfully, fruitlessly burning. She looked in at the dining-room and its preparation for cheer and welcome, and turned away with a shiver of disgust, and then, with a moan of pathetic misery, threw herself into an armchair and tried to think. What should she do? What could she do? Her love for Randy was so fond, so glowing, that she had gifted him with the qualities of a god, leaning upon him in everything, trusting him in everything, relying upon his word as though it were a pledge from on high; and yet within these few hours he had, all unasked, given her his promise not to see or speak with that—woman again except he came first to her—his wife—and told her the need; then had gone secretly, almost di-

rectly, to meet his old love in the shadows of the night long after the hour that usually saw the last light extinguished along officers' row.

If her old friend from baby days, the colonel, had come to her and said that Randy was false; if her idol, her beloved father, had added his confirmation of the colonel's views, she would have laughed them down so long as Randy—her hero Randy—swore that he was true. Many a woman will stand by her lover against a world in evidence, yet turn to stone against him when she sees one apparent sign of interest in another. Poor girl! He was her first, her only love. He was hers and only hers, and should be only hers, for when that other—creature had scorned and denied him, had he not been brought sore-stricken to her doors? Had she not won him back to life through the wealth and glory of her own unsuspected love? From the day of their wedding until this woman came never had she known a wish that was not his. Day and night she dreamed, planned, and thought for him, sought only to make herself worthier his love, dearer to his eyes—sweeter to his caress.

Who was there to compare with him in manliness, in courtesy, in knightly bearing? What officer was the peer of Randy—what officer even in the dear old Riflers with whom had been her home from baby days? They chided her, some of the girls, in what they called her defection. “You used to say there *could* be no regiment like the Riflers, Floy. You used to vow you’d never marry out of the old regiment.” “Aye, but that was before Randy came,” was her simple answer, and then they told her Randy was her world, and proudly she answered, “I believe he is.” They warned her—some of the older and wiser matrons—and God knows they had much on which to base their views—it was never safe to love any man too much, even Randy; to which she answered with sunshine in her eyes, “How could one love Randy too much?” Mind you, she never volunteered these overflowings of her heart, but these women had been her friends from her earliest days. She was still shy, even with him, but such well-meant warnings always seemed to put her on the defensive, as it were, and, poor child, she believed it her

duty to her husband that she should never allow him to go undefended, even though the attack were intangible as a woman's sneer. And they looked so well together, and he was so proud of her, so devoted to her, "so conscious of her," as some one said. Nowhere in that garrison was there man or woman who was able to say that Randy had not borne himself as an almost ideal lover and husband ever since that sun-kissed wedding day. Many could even feel a sense of what is called "agreeable disappointment," which always strikes me as a phraseological parallel for that other remarkable euphemism of so many of our countrywomen—"she's enjoying poor health." Yet withal, Florence had the sympathy, the genuine affection of all Fort Sedgwick, even in—or rather notwithstanding—her enthusiastic estimate of Randy's qualities as husband and as man, and her own extreme beatitude as wife. Then Mrs. Buxton ventured to fire a shot, as she stood watching them strolling homeward together after parade one evening, absorbed in one another, and to observe to her own supremely indifferent



"You always call when I'm washing."

lord, "There now, Bux, there's another girl making a fool of herself over a man, only she's the sweetest fool I ever knew in my born days."

Bux himself roared it out for Floy's benefit not long after, and did it so that half Fort Sedgwick heard it, for the one valuable quality Bux possessed as a cavalry officer was his voice. The volume of sound he could produce when bellowing instructions to a regimental skirmish-line was something prodigious, but of so rasping and exasperating a *timbre* that his old-time derider, Blake, likened it in force to a fog-horn and in staying power to boiled cabbage—not a neat comparison but one expressly fitting.

And now, strangely enough, this maddest of nights poor Florence could not get those words and that tone out of her head. She had flushed and turned speechless away at the time, hurt to her soul and indignant, too, but the training of her youth was strong. These were people her father and mother had taught her to respect, and though angry, indignant, remonstrance was in her heart,

she stifled the words that strove to spring to her lips.

"I expect I've put my foot in it again to-day," reported Bux to his better-half, when he got home.

"Well, I'm sure *I'm* never surprised," was the lady's prompt reply.

"I fear I've been rude to Colonel Buxton, Randy," faltered Floy, when that gentleman came in from troop drill an hour later.

"You couldn't be rude even to Bux, my darling," was his answer, as he folded her in his arms.

And these are not types of the "first year wedded" and the "quarter-century mated" love as seen in the army. I have known many and many a couple who have risen together through every grade in the line, loved, loving, and lovers to the end.

At one o'clock Florence had set her lights in the parlor window. At two, with that booming, gong-like sound reverberating in her ears, that incessant repetition of Buxton's coarse words, she had sprung from the chair in which she had been brooding. writhing, shud-

dering for half an hour, and then, tearing down the shade, close looping the curtains, she hurried to the hall and locked and bolted the door. "Another girl making a fool of herself for a man—another girl!" God! how the words rang—resounded through her brain, buzzed and whirred like angry wasps in her ears, hissed and rattled, aye, stung like the venomous reptiles she had learned to shun from early childhood. "Making a fool of herself for a man who would leave her—so soon—for that painted—yes—that padded thing!" They'd soon learn that an army-bred girl loved, indeed, with all her heart and soul, but could hate, hate, hate as well!

Wild-eyed, with beating heart, she rushed through the little dining-room to the dark kitchen beyond and rapped imperiously at a door. "Hop Ling!" she cried, "up, I need you." No answer. "The brute," she murmured to herself, as she threw herself heavily upon the door, and it flew open and plunged her in. The Chinaman's little sanctum was deserted. She kept no maid. One schooled Chinaman easily and efficiently did all the

housework of a lieutenant's humble quarters and was generally employed in that capacity in almost every garrison of the far West. She flew to the rear door and locked that, then up to the second story where were the pretty guest-rooms as well as their own—hers and Randy's, with all their closets and nooks and corners. She took one rapid survey through them, and then one fierce, wild look at herself in the mirror of her dainty dressing-table. Are you Floy Tremaine? Are you the little girl who was reared in the Riflers? Are you to make a lifelong fool for any man? And as she spoke she began to open the dress she had been wearing for Randy's benefit. The folds of the stylish skirt, one of Mrs. Hayne's planning when in Chicago, were tossed in reckless disorder upon the snowy coverlet of the bed, and her precious locket—Randy's locket—was as suddenly unclasped from the round, white throat, and in all the tumult in her soul she heard no sound of the sudden stir and sortie at the guard-house. She never knew that there was no sentry faithful to his watch along the rear of officers' row, to take up and pass



"Are you Flo Tremaine?"



on the stirring, reassuring cry that no army girl can hear without rejoicing or miss without alarm—"Two o'clock and all's well."

The dawn was breaking over the far Jornada and turning the distant Guadaloupe into gold when the Riflers rolled away—officers and men, "barring the band and Company 'Ike'* at Sedgwick," as the cavalry trumpeter remarked to the gunner when they were going out to stir the echoes with their reveille; only these at Sedgwick, and one stalwart old captain with his devoted half-hundred, Tremaine, still doing duty at the cantonment—fond, lonely old father, whose heart was wrapped up in that one child, yet could not deny her to the man she loved so well. Sedgwick was beginning to yawn and stir. The night owls in the cañons were hooting back to their nests, dismayed by the howlings of the human night

* By War Department order a few years ago Companies "I" and "K" of each regiment of Infantry were "skeletonized" by transfer of their men to other companies, leaving those two merely paper commands. Just as "Co. Q" has been for years the derisive title of the guard-house prisoners, so does "Co. Ike" begin to appear as a name for the bereaved and friendless commands referred to.

owls tacking home to duty, already half regretful of the whiskey wasted, while before them was that remorseless wrath to come. The cooks were astir in the barracks, and filmy smoke-veils were sailing straight aloft from the chimneys of half a dozen company kitchens. Already, too, the household servants along the row of cavalry officers' quarters, that which backed to the south, were lighting their little morning blazes, for Sedgwick lay beyond range and anthracite. In the good old days of twenty years before, the cocktail, not coffee, was the necessary prelude to reveille and morning stables. Now, with the wisdom that comes long after war, only case-hardened, red-nosed, furrowed-cheeked, bandy-legged old dragoons ever dreamed of a drink at that hour of leap from sleep to life: the inner cavalryman craves the juice of Mocha and mocks at rye. From every "set" of cavalry quarters then the kitchen chimney sent aloft its feathery plume, with one exception—a subaltern's house well over toward the western end of the row; and toward the gate thereof, edging away from the ribald homeward-bound of the main

road and shuffling stolidly across the mesa, Hop Ling was making his rapid way. Fan-tan had gone against him, and but for his hands his pockets were empty. Hop bore with him an air of depression, and was followed by a faint fragrance as of mandragora. His bleary little eyes were seaching furtively along that line of fence and stables for the gleam of the sentry's carbine and cap ornaments. He must place that watchman of the night and know his ground before he entered post. 'Spose the officer of the guard had happened to meet him during the night. 'Spose somebody sick. "Spose Misse Mellium she wanttee chow-chow?" Bang! the morning gun roared its lusty summons to be up and doing, and skulking coyotes squatted lower as they sneaked away from the outlying quarters, no chicken the richer, and the guard turned out with twenty additions to Company "Q" and more still a-coming; and the telegraph instrument in the clerk's office began to call "Lalarrup—Lalarrup—Lalarrup," and the soldier operator, washing his face in a tin basin outside, glanced up and said, "You be damned! You

always call when I'm washing. What n hell's up now?" and had to drop ablutions and, wringing his hands as he ran, to answer the sharp, insistent summons; and as he listened his face grew keen and excited, and, checking the rapid clicking of the key one instant, he yelled to the drowsy clerk in the adjoining office, "Billy—quick! Tumble up and see if Lieutenant Merriam's back. I've a message for him," and then clicked and listened and noted again; but the reveille was chirruping its merry music, and the sweet, cool, morning air rang with the melody, and the troopers were tumbling out from the barracks, and ever across the parade officers came stalking forth from their doorways, for the —th were sticklers about morning stables and roll call; and, most prominent figure of all, streaking across the mesa with pigtails and pajamas a-flying, with his felt-bottomed boots fairly flashing, with flaring eyes, distended for once at least with mad appeal and dread in every feature and shrill distress in his chattering tones, came Hop Ling, straight for the guard house and shrieking for "Mellium."

A new officer of the guard, a scowling and unresponsive man, turned from his survey of the array of grinning prisoners, forgetting their own troubles in the contemplation of Hop's grotesque misery, and this new official, Whittaker by name, sternly shouted, "Stop your infernal noise, you clapper-jawed heathen. What the devil's the matter?"

"Mellium! Mellium!" was all poor Hop could pant.

"Mr. Merriam isn't here," said Whittaker majestically.

"Oh—wha he gone?—Misse Mellium gone! *She* gone—Minion—allee gone!"

"Whew!" said Whittaker. "Sergeant, take charge of the guard. I've got to go up to Captain Grafton's and report this. Come on with me, you heathen," and, forgetful of the officer of the day and only too ready to visit Grafton's and bask under that window, the lieutenant hastened away, Hop obediently and hopefully following. Matters weren't so bad perhaps, then, after all, thought he. Odd though the freak might be, his master and mistress might possibly have trotted away

together for a very early morning ride and would soon be back demanding breakfast.

But Grafton was out in an instant, and together did the three hasten to the pretty nest which Randy had so proudly furnished for his bride. Hop ushered them to the dark, empty parlor, then to the empty rooms above.

There on the unrumped bed, just where she had thrown them, were the garments Floy had hastily discarded. There on the dressing-table were toilet articles in wild disarray. "She's heard in some way of his orders to chase those damned greasers," said Whittaker sullenly. He, who hated the name of Fanny Hayward a year gone by for having jilted his fondest friend, now well-nigh hated *him* because the woman sought him again, and Whittaker knew it.

"We can soon tell," said Grafton briefly, "by following her trail."

Down to the little stable they went; but first Grafton stepped back into Randy's bath and dressing-room. Yes, just as he thought, there was a note stuck in Randy's mirror, but no womanly little scrawl, no young wife's coo-

ing confidence to her devoted mate. It was in stout envelope, and the superscription, in a hand that spread itself over the entire face, was formal, indeed menacing:

LIEUTENANT MERRIAM,

Private

and personal.

—th Cavalry.

The captain's face grew quickly grave as he came forth and closed the door behind him.

"Which way did Merriam head?" asked he of Whittaker a moment later, as the three re-gathered back of the line.

"Straight off to the southwest," said Whittaker, "and here go *her* tracks—by Jove! Straight away for the end of the row—and—from there?——"

The two officers looked in each other's eyes a moment, then strode hurriedly to the west end of the line. Before them there—broad and far spreading, brave in the slanting sunshine, the rolling reach of the mesa toward the Santa Clara. Beyond that valley the slow-rising stretch of desert toward the old, old mission miles and miles away. Beyond

all, the far foothills and glistening range of the Mescalero.

But not toward these did Mignon's dainty foot-tracks lead. Straight as the crow flies they clipped the sandy barren when once well out beyond the line and hearing of the westward sentry. Straight, swift, and sure, like homing pigeon, Floy had evidently shaken loose her rein and bade her pet and precious bear her, swerving never, far at least as strength would last, to where there was ever waiting her the changeless love and pity and protection of the sheltering arms at the old cantonment, now her only hope of home.

CHAPTER XIII.

"No word of this to any one, Whittaker," said Grafton, as they turned away. He was beginning to see through it all. He knew that two ladies of the garrison were calling at his quarters just at that luckless hour near retreat, when, as he had urged, Merriam went thither and asked for Mrs. McLane. He knew that they had left and gone on up the row while his wife was expostulating with Fanny aloft and Randy was waiting below. He knew that one at least of their number would be sure to tell what was occurring, not as a matter of malice by any means, but simply because she couldn't help telling anything and everything that she saw and heard. He knew that sympathizing women were dropping in every few minutes to see "dear Florrie" herself, if a possible thing, or to inquire how she was, and he quickly conjectured that one or more of these

visitors had let fall the fatal observation. What Grafton did not know was that such a visitation had befallen after Florence had virtually asked Randy to tell where he had been, and after his hapless failure to explain immediately the entire circumstances. It roused the demon of her passionate nature to be told the truth by other lips than his. But this in itself, reasoned Grafton, was not enough to drive Florence into flight. She must have watched for his later coming, must have seen him go—oh, fatal step! for which he, George Grafton, and no one else, was responsible!—away from the path that led to his wife and home, straight to that which bore him to the side of the woman he had loved before ever he set eyes on Floy Tremaine. . And thither she, perchance, had followed; but there—what had she seen?—what had she heard? There were aching hearts in many households at Sedgwick that cloudless morning, but the man who suffered most was Grafton. The whole truth flashed upon him as he followed the prints of Mignon's nimble hoof. He would have to tell his wife and Mrs. Hayne, but no one else.

"No word of this to any one, Whittaker," therefore he cautioned, with a sign.

"Well, I'm not all asinine," was that troubled subaltern's reply, "though I dare say you've thought me so of late."

"God forbid that I should judge any man," thought Grafton to himself, "after what I've done this past night."

Harriet Grafton was greatly shocked when told her husband's fears, and did not altogether meekly accept his caution to keep the secret from Fanny, who still slept the sleep of the innocent and virtuous and clear of conscience. Hop Ling had been told to go indoors, put all the rooms to rights, have the breakfast-table set, and breakfast prepared as usual, and he wondered but obeyed. Mrs. Hayne was speedily aroused by the announcement that Mrs. Grafton was below, and was well aware that something extraordinary had occurred to warrant a call at so early an hour. Even the children, wearied after last night's vigil, were still asleep. Donning a wrapper, she hastened out on the landing and softly called over the balusters, "I know you have

news for me, Mrs. Grafton, please come up."

And in the telling of her tidings, was it any wonder that the younger matron burst into tears?

"We must try to make it seem that she has ridden off at dawn in hopes of meeting Randy on his return with the prisoners," was Mrs. Hayne's decision, after she had recovered from the shock and had heard the whole story; and this commended itself to Grafton as wise when his wife came back to him and he had returned from the never-to-be-neglected "morning stables." And this too was what they intended at first to say to Merriam when he should come in, ravenous for breakfast and astonished at not finding his wife. But high noon came and brought no Randy. In the words of the acting adjutant, high noon brought only high jinks.

Crane, officer of the day, and a dozen other officers had seen Hop Ling's frantic charge across the parade at reveille, and numbers of men had heard his announcement of the general hegira at Merriam's. Before guard

mounting it was known that Mignon's trail led straight away to the upper fords of the Santa Clara—far from the direction in which Randy had gone. At ten a herdsman came in who said he "reckoned the lady must have dropped this." He saw her riding like the wind the short cut for José's ranch on the old Navajo trail, and he handed over poor Florrie's little traveling-bag, which she had evidently strapped to her saddle, never calculating—perhaps never caring—what the strain might be, never missing it when it was gone. They sent it to Mrs. Hayne, who could no longer keep up her brave face but sobbed over it as would a mother over some prized relic of a lost and beloved child.

Then Bux ordered out three of his swiftest trailers and riders and the best light wagon at the post. With the wagon went the post surgeon and Mrs. Hayne, who left her brood to a neighbor's care. They took with them such rugs and restoratives as seemed necessary, and at noon they were across the Santa Clara on the road to the cantonment, expecting to reach José's by nightfall and find their run-

away darling there, exhausted by her long hours in saddle and compelled to stay under that friendly shelter, as (sometimes with her father and twice at least with Randy) she had stayed on her journeys to and fro. There she would have to remain over night until Mignon should be able to go on again with the rise of the morning star.

Meantime the wires from Cimarron Junction had been hot with news, and McGrath, the operator, lived the day of his life, for hours the most important man at the post. The rioters had got wind of the coming of troops and had sought to block the way by wrecking a freight caboose in Calamas Gorge. The Riflers swarmed out and had things in shape within the hour, and went whistling on again. Every one knew trouble would end the moment they got to the scene of the strike, but what might not happen meantime?

Something had happened. On one of the passenger trains blockaded beyond Cimarron was a Chicago lawyer of most active mind and being, a Chicagoan of no little experience with scenes of the kind, and this gentleman had

fired message after message to Lieutenant Randolph Merriam, at Sedgwick, and finally demanded reason for that officer's silence.

"What'll I do with this here, sir?" said McGrath, coming finally into the adjutant's office. "There's three messages here for Mr. Merriam, urgent ones too, and finally the sender asks why he don't reply."

"Say that Mr. Merriam is still away after Mexican murderers and we expect him any minute. Ask if any other officer will do? Hello! What's that, orderly?" he broke off, at the sound of hoof-beats and excited voices without.

A trooper entered, dust-covered and weary, to make his brief report, Captain Grafton darting in just in time for the news.

"Lieutenant Merriam's wounded, sir, an' his horse killed, and can the doctor go back with me?"

"My God!" thought Grafton ere he spoke aloud. "Is there to be no end to the calamities of this day?" Repressing his own eagerness, he waited in stern self-discipline while the adjutant went quickly into details, as was

his business, in striving to learn the extent and nature of Merriam's wounds; then, the colonel being over home, turned for advice to Grafton.

"Only our contract doctor left," he said. "The others are off with the Riflers or—in chase." Hurriedly he wrote a few lines to Buxton and then turned to McGrath.

"Tell Captain Grafton about these messages for Mr. Merriam, will you?" said he, "and captain, will you please attend to that while I look to Randy's relief? Thank God they didn't kill him," he added as he went noisily out. "What in heaven's name did Buxton expect him to do, anyhow?"

"Have you a right to say what is wanted of Mr. Merriam and whom these are from?" asked Grafton of the operator.

"I couldn't say a word, sir, ordinarily, but I believe they'll never blame me now. It's a Mr. Edward Parry and he begs Mr. Merriam, who *can* get through, to come up beyond Cimarron to him on important business—his train's blockaded by strikers."

"Give me a blank," said Grafton quickly.



"Am I to scatter my medical staff to the four winds?"

"I think I partially understand the case," and these were the words that were wired at one o'clock to the eager lawyer on the waiting train:

"Merriam wounded in affair with bandits this morning—niles from post. Mrs. McLane is still under my roof. Command my services.

"George Grafton, Captain."

Then Grafton followed the trail of the adjutant—went straightway to Buxton, who was taking his noonday siesta and hated to be disturbed at such a time and was crusty, as could be expected, when asked permission by Captain Grafton to ride out and meet the wounded officer. He flew into a tantrum.

"My God, sir! No, sir. Am I to scatter my medical staff to the four winds, with Brady and Corcoran past praying for here, and then have my troop leaders scattering too! The Lord only knows what's going to happen before we get through with this day, and now Merriam's shot and otherwise injured, and all on account of those beggarly greasers. No, sir! Not another man goes out till we've rounded up those already afield."

Captain Grafton turned without a word of remonstrance, with his usual grave salute. From there he went to see that Merriam's home was in readiness, and then to his wife, who read tidings of new disaster in his troubled eyes.

"Oh, George!" she cried. "Will this dreadful day never end? The servants say Merriam's shot and mortally wounded, and that the Riflers are wrecked at Calamas Gorge——"

"Merriam is shot and *not* mortally wounded, dear, and the Riflers refused to be wrecked at Calamas Gorge. Where is Mrs. McLane? Has she heard?"

"Dozing placidly in her room—too much shaken to come down-stairs to-day. Had her coffee and her luncheon in bed, and I gave Annette positive orders to let her know nothing about—Florence, and she hasn't. But presently, when she dresses for the afternoon and comes down and hears about Randy? What then?"

"Still sleeping, is she?" asked Grafton, ignoring for a moment the question as to what might happen when their guest awoke and

heard the news. "Yet I think you said she was greatly excited after getting that second dispatch and had been dreadfully nervous."

"She certainly was for some hours, and you know she walked and tossed last night after she came up-stairs. Then she seemed to fall into a deep sleep, and Annette said she could hardly arouse her for her coffee this morning."

Grafton tugged at his mustache and gave himself over to deep thought a few minutes, Mrs. Grafton anxiously watching his face.

"Well," said he, starting up, and, as it were, shaking himself together, "let her have her sleep out. I fancy more news is on the road; I know her lawyer is."

"Why! Mr. Parry?—her brother-in-law?"

"The very same, Harriet, and his train is side-tracked by strikers miles above Cimarron. There are three dispatches from him for Randy now."

Mrs. Grafton was silent a moment, as she stood by his side looking up into his thoughtful face, as though seeking there the solution of the questions that puzzled her. Then, dusting away with her finger-tips some flakes

of cigar-ashes that clung to the breast of the captain's undress coat, she ventured:

"There are two things I can't understand. If he's her lawyer why he should be wiring to Randy and not to her, and why it is the strikers don't cut the wires if they want to cut off all business."

His broad, brown hand patted caressingly the taper, white fingers toying about the little toggle of his watch-chain, as he looked down into her anxious, upturned face.

"His letters to Fan have been unanswered and he probably expects her to pay as little attention to his dispatches. As for the wires, they are more necessary to the strikers in their combinations than to anybody else, otherwise they'd have cut them long ago—ah, here comes our messenger now."

And sure enough the orderly trumpeter came trotting up the steps, the usual brown envelope in his hand.

Mrs. Grafton eagerly watched her husband as he read. "I thought so," said he, looking quietly up. "Read that," and handed her the dispatch.

"To Captain Grafton, Fort Sedgwick.

"Thanks for your courtesy. Shocked to hear of Merriam's mishap. Mrs. McLane should have met me in Denver three days ago. Must be ready moment road opens.

"EDWARD PARRY."

Three hours later, just as the ladies and children began to appear in their fresh afternoon toilets and the baby carriages and nurses were in force along the gravel walk, and the band was assembling for its daily concert on the parade, a vision of womanly loveliness, albeit garbed in sombre black, came smilingly down the stairs at Grafton's and rustling out to shower gracious welcome on the little group of ladies and officers on the front piazza. Some of the men were seated—Whittaker and Minturn notably being nearest the door—others sunning themselves out along the fence, while the ladies occupied their camp-chairs or the steps as best pleased their fancy. Grafton's was always a popular rendezvous on the cavalry side, and to-day the assembly was more numerous than usual, and anybody but Fanny Mc-

Lane could not have failed to note how deep was the shadow that overspread every face, how sombre and mirthless the tenor of the talk. Intent only on charming, she came trippingly forth, bestowing a white hand on the red-striped Minturn, who was prompt to seize it, and smiles and nods and chirrups upon everybody. The men who had risen and doffed their caps did not retake their seats, for a trumpeter was sounding a stable call, and Whittaker murmured with telling effect, "You never come now until you know we have to go;" and there was a slow and somewhat reluctant start, the rival subs hanging on to the last. Grafton, usually the promptest of troop leaders, went as far as his gate only and there said in a low tone to his own subaltern, "Tell Colonel Buxton I am detained a few minutes on important personal business," and let the group go sauntering out into the sunshine without him. The band was gayly crashing through the spirited measures of the "Liberty Bell." Major Freeman, straddling down the row in chase of the troop officers, glanced up and smiled and waved his hand.

"The Riflers put a head on that Cimarron strike in short order, didn't they?" said he. "The news has just come—trains running to-morrow."

Out on the sunlit mesa a mile away a dusty little *cortège* came slowly, wearily trooping homeward, bearing a wounded officer to the longed-for shelter of his home; and Grafton, with still another of those fateful brown envelopes in his hand, bent over and interrupted the lovely widow in the midst of her animated chat with the ladies from next door.

"Pardon me one minute, Mrs. McLane," he said. "Some rather urgent dispatches came while you were sleeping, and this has just reached me. If you can spare a moment to glance over them I will have the answers sent. Suppose we step inside."

It was wonderful with what suddenness gladness and gayety would vanish from her eyes, leaving there only a hunted, haggard look; so, too, in the lines about the sensitive mouth; yet the soft, creamy tint of the fair skin remained unchanged, as did the gentle color. Mutely she arose and followed him,

and, the parlor being in the shade and too near the party on the porch, he led on to the bright dining-room whose windows commanded a view of the sunshiny mesa. There he turned.

"Mr. Parry wires me that he had expected you in Denver three days ago, and that your affairs demand that you should go thither the moment the road is open—which will be tomorrow. He says he has vainly tried to get an answer to his letters to you, and that no reply came to his dispatches. Can I be of any service, Mrs. McLane? This seems most urgent, and, pardon me, I believe it my duty to point out to you that your friends are rendered powerless by your own neglect to act."

"I did try," she faltered. "I had to see Mr. Merriam." She made a piteous picture, looking up there into his stern, soldierly face.

"But, pardon me again, I cannot see, knowing nothing of the nature of this—litigation, what Mr. Merriam has to do with it. Is his testimony necessary? Is that why Mr. Parry has been urging him all day to come up to Cimarron?"



"I did try," she faltered."

"He—he, too—he has been wiring for—Randy?" she faltered, her eyes big with some new dread. "Did he go? Has he gone?"

"He couldn't go, Mrs. McLane. He was sent in pursuit of Mexican ruffians last night, and was shot and severely wounded in the fight this morning. Look! They're bringing him in now."

And for the second time within the week Fanny McLane went senseless in a second, a limp and nerveless heap upon the floor. They had to carry her to her room, and Grafton was the burden bearer; and then, having laid her upon her bed, and while the women were bustling about with the usual restoratives, he stopped one moment before her profusely littered toilet-table. A little case, half-hidden among the mess, unerringly caught his eye. He took it, touched the spring, gave one quick glance at the dainty, delicate instruments and phials inside, and replaced it, with the quiet remark, "I thought so."

CHAPTER XIV.

BUT Grafton had graver work ahead, and it was close at hand. Punctilious soldier that he was, he would leave no loophole for the possible criticism of a superior. Hurriedly writing a few lines to Colonel Buxton notifying him that the wagon bringing Merriam was now close to the garrison, and that, as arranged between them, he would meet it at the gate, he sent the note by his servant and hastened up the row to the angle formed by the south and west fronts, where an opening had been left in the fence for the convenience of riding parties; and it was through this gap that poor Randy was presently trundled and then down along the line to his own doorway. By this time the pain in his strained and stiffened leg was intense, while the arm, hurriedly but skilfully dressed when far afield, was troubling him but little. His one thought all the way had been

for Florence. He had insisted on scribbling her a little note before they reached the Santa Clara, just to tell her he was all right; that there was nothing to worry about, and all he needed was a few days of her nursing. The doctor gave it to one of the men and gravely bade him ride ahead and give it to Mrs. Merriam, and the trooper had duly handed it in at the door, where Hop Ling received it with his customary grin, and stowed it away on the mantel in the now deserted parlor where notes and cards had generally been displayed for the eyes of the young mistress.

And now as they neared the familiar spot, poor Randy would sit up. It would never do to come before her eyes prostrated as though sorely hurt. Anything to spare her needless shock or worry. He even essayed a semi-jocular "How are you, old man?" as he caught sight of Grafton, and tried a smile and a wave of his hand to the ladies who appeared on the southernmost porch of the infantry lines.

"Why, you look as though you'd had a worse tussle than I, captain," he laughed painfully, as he held out his hand. "How is Flor-

ence? It hasn't frightened her much, has it? I hope Mrs. Hayne's been with her."

"She's been a good deal troubled, of course," answered Grafton, gravely, "but—but Mrs. Hayne is—bringing her round all right, I think. How are you, old man? You *did* have a ride!"

But now Randy was peering out along the row—their own row. Women were to be seen here and there along the verandas, gazing sympathetically toward the slowly moving party, but no feminine form was visible on the piazza of his little home.

"Better lie back, Mr. Merriam," urged the doctor. "Try to make him do so," he murmured to Grafton. "We've got to get him quiet in his room before we let him know anything." Already the anxious young physician had been told that Mrs. Merriam was probably fifty miles away, and his soul was wrung at the thought of what that would mean to his patient.

"Yes, lie down, Randy, till we get you indoors," urged Grafton. "We've had to put up a game on Mrs. Randy—(God forgive me

the lie," he prayed). "Knowing how anxious you were and we were lest she should be shocked, we—kept her away. Mrs. Hayne and Dr. Gould are looking out for her. She's not to be allowed to come near you till we get you safe and sound and bathed and all fixed up in bed. Of course we know now, Randy—we didn't before, but Mrs. Hayne had to tell my wife how careful we have to be of her—now, and really, old boy, she oughtn't to see you till you're washed and dressed. You look tough, Randy."

And though the face he longed to see as they bore him up the steps was miles and miles away, Merriam stifled his own disappointment and bravely thanked them. "God bless you and Mrs. Grafton! That was indeed thoughtful of you, old boy," he gasped, for pain was wrenching him, and he gave a long, long sigh of relief when at last he was lifted from the stretcher to a bed in the spare room.

But that sigh was a faint whisper as compared with the long, long breath that Grafton drew, as he sat him down in the adjoining room and mopped his streaming forehead.

Colonel Buxton and others—all the officers, almost—felt bound to come to the house between stables and retreat, just to see how Randy was getting on, but the answer was the same to one and all. No one was to be admitted, for the doctor was “trying to get him to sleep.”

And surely enough, bathed, refreshed, his arm set and dressed, Randy soon found himself stowed away in a soft, white bed, but oh, so weak and drowsy after all the labor of the chase and the long, long day of racking pain. They were to bring Florence to him now, his wife, his darling, impatiently waiting for the summons, as he thought her, at Mrs. Hayne's, and he was stretching out his arms to her—his one available arm, rather, and fondly murmuring her name, when the weary eyelids closed and, numb and impotent, he drifted away into deep, deep slumber.

“There,” said the doctor, at last, “he'll do now!”

“Aye,” murmured Grafton, “but what will the waking be if there's no Florence here to-morrow.”

That was an anxious night at Sedgwick. Merriam slept like the dead, and twice the young doctor feared it might be necessary to rouse him, thinking that perhaps he had sent that tiny shot of his hypodermic syringe with too heavy a charge. But so long as Randy was ignorant of his wife's mad escapade he would have slept through sheer exhaustion and weariness, and his physician need not have troubled himself. Twice Grafton tiptoed in, and the hospital attendant arose at his coming and reported that the patient had not stirred.

Over at Grafton's quarters, however, they had to deal with a less tractable creature. Fanny McLane had roused from her swoon and was nervously, excitably, irritably wide awake, demanding actually to be allowed to see Mr. Merriam. Even Annette was sent out of the room and Mrs. Grafton had her friend and guest to herself, and her tears and prayers, her reproaches and imprecations, fell on hardened ears. Mrs. Grafton was adamant.

"It is mad folly to talk of such a thing, Fanny," she replied to every assault. "Mr. Merriam is far too severely injured to see any-

body, much less you, who would importune him for your own selfish purposes. Captain Grafton says the doctor has forbidden him to everybody, and he knows. In the morning Captain Grafton will see him for you, if the doctor will permit."

Whereat the widow only stormed the more and declared, with hysteric tears, that they were keeping her away from Randy Merriam out of spite and hatred just at the most critical time. "He'll die, he'll die," she cried, "and carry my one safeguard with him to the grave."

Sorely puzzled, Mrs. Grafton had to leave her once in a while for a few minutes at a time to consult her husband, who could frequently be heard moving about the parlor or going quickly in and out of the house. It was plain that Grafton was troubled about something besides Randy, and at eleven o'clock the explanation came.

Up to sundown Florence—Mrs. Merriam—had not been seen or heard of at José's ranch.

One of the trailers, Rafferty by name, declared that Mignon's tracks turned suddenly to the northward and led away from the ranch



Penny

and into the maze of foothills to the right of the cantonment trail. At sundown they had reached José's, still hoping against hope that she would be there, but no sign of her had been seen, and, borrowing a fresh horse, Rafferty started back to Sedgwick at the gallop to carry the news. He met the doctor with Mrs. Hayne only a short distance from José's, and they went on to the ranch hoping for better tidings, but bade him ride for Sedgwick with all speed. Rafferty could ride week in and week out if the horse could stand it, and José's broncho was a used-up quadruped by the time they reached the Santa Clara. There he turned him into a ranchman's corral and borrowed another, never stopping to say "by your leave, sir." This was on the Queen's service in Rafferty's mind, and no man's property was sacred when "Miss Florence's" life was involved. Buxton was up and about when the courier came, and in ten minutes had reached the office and sent for Grafton. What he wished to know was, had she any reason whatever for turning away from the beaten track and taking to the unknown regions off

the road and far to the northwest of the settlements? Grafton knew of none. There was indeed grave reason why she should not.

For fifty miles northward the Santa Clara twined and twisted through a fairly fertile valley, once the herding-ground of the Navajos, now wild and almost unsettled. Americans and Mexicans both had tried it as a stock range, but American cattle and American horses demanded a better quality of grass and more of it than would serve the stomach of the Indian pony. Treaty obligations sent the Navajos farther into the mountains to the northwest—beyond the Mescalero—but there were restless roamers who were constantly off the reservation, sometimes on pass but oftener on mischief, and on the pretext of trading they came recklessly as far as the settlement, and then somebody's horses were sure to be missing, spirited away into the foothills, whither it was almost useless to follow. The Navajos said the Mexicans were the thieves, the Mexicans declared them to be the Navajos, and when both parties were caught and accused, with prompt unanimity both announced

that Apaches must again be raiding, and the name of Apache covered a multitude of sins. Time was when Victorio and Nana led the cavalry some glorious chases into the Mes-calero, but both those redoubtables had met their fate, and agency officials across the Arizona line were ready to swear that none of their once intractable followers ever thought of quitting corn and melon planting for the forbidden joys of the raid and the warpath. All the same the foothills and the valley far to the northwest of the settlements were full of mystery and danger—the roaming-ground of the horse-thief and the renegade, and Merriam's men, just in from their long chase, pointed out how the Mexican ruffians, though starting originally toward the southwest, had in long wide circuit gradually worked their way northward, as though making for this very region. The leader of the gang that shot Brady and Corcoran was a fellow by the name of Ramon Valdez, and there was no deviltry too steep for him. The news, therefore, that Florence Merriam had not reached José's, **but that her trail was lost somewhere among**

the buttes and bowlders four miles to the eastward of that frontier refuge, struck dismay to the hearts of her friends at Sedgwick. The tidings went from lip to lip, from house to house, like wildfire, and by midnight an entire troop had ridden forth with their ever-ready three days' rations, and with Captain George Grafton in command, and their orders were not to return without Mrs. Merriam or definite news of her.

Mrs. Grafton let her husband go only with deep reluctance. He was very necessary to her now. She felt the need of his support in the management of her truculent patient. She had to leave the latter while assisting him in his busy preparations, and she was surprised and rejoiced to see that on her return to her Fanny had become far more calm and resigned. The ladies in many households were still up and flitting about the post, tearfully, forebodingly discussing the situation, and several of them had dropped in to speak a word with Mrs. Grafton—Whittaker and Minturn being ever on the alert to escort such parties—and so it was long after one—Indeed, it was nearly

two o'clock—when at last, after a final peep at her now placidly sleeping guest and leaving Annette curled up on the sofa by her mistress' bedside, Mrs. Grafton finally sought her own pillow and slept long into the sunshine of the following day.

Awakening with a start at the sound of stirring music on the parade, she found that it was after eight and guard mounting was in full blast. Summoning a servant, her first question was for news of Mrs. Merriam, for servants always know the garrison news before their masters. Not a word had been received. Presently she tiptoed to Fanny's room, softly turned the knob, and noiselessly entered. There lay her guest still plunged in deep slumber, but Annette had disappeared, gone, probably, to the kitchen for coffee. Far over at the east, where the railway crossed the barren mesa, a locomotive whistle broke the silence of the desert with long, exultant blast. The blockade then was broken. The first train was coming in from Cimarron. Dressing with greater haste than usual, she ordered breakfast served, and then went out on the

piazza and looked up the row toward the Merriams'. The doctor was just coming out of the gate, and Whittaker, who had spent the night there on watch—all thought of rivalry forgotten—was standing on the top step, apparently detaining the physician with some question. Eager for news of Randy, Mrs. Grafton threw her husband's cavalry cape over her shoulders and tripped briskly up the gravel walk. "Still sleeping," said the doctor, "and how is your patient?"

"Also sleeping," said Mrs. Grafton. "I don't see how people *can* sleep so soundly at such times," whereat the doctor looked conscious but said nothing.

All that morning people strained their eyes and rubbed their binoculars and searched the distant foothills to the northwest, hoping for the coming of couriers with news; but not until afternoon were they rewarded. Then, covered with sweat and dust, a corporal of Grafton's troop rode in. Dr. Gould and Mrs. Hayne were still at José's, though they feared they could be of no use there, for not a sign of Florence had been found. Grafton had



Hof Ling



sent couriers on to the Catamount with the tidings of her peril, and his men, in wide dispersed order, were scouring the foothills long days' marches away. Full half an hour the ladies grouped at Buxton's, listening to the soldiers' description of their search, and then were strolling homeward when, over toward the west end of the cavalry line, arose the sound of commotion and distress.

An instant later, as the doctor, blanching, turned to hasten thither, a woman dressed in deepest black came reeling forth from the Merriams' doorway and plunging wildly down the steps. Every one knew her at a glance—it was Fanny McLane, who stood there now swaying at the gate as though gasping for breath, while calling inarticulately for aid. It was but a few seconds before the doctor reached her. They saw him accost her briefly, then go springing past her up the steps and into the house. A moment more and Mrs. Grafton, with other women, reached her.

“What is the matter? What has happened,

And cowering, sobbing, shivering, she made answer:

"Oh, stop him! save him! He'll kill himself. I—told him his wife was gone."

Too late. Out to the stable the doctor chased, for bed and room were deserted. There, wildly gesticulating and pointing to the open mesa, was Hop Ling. "He makee my saddle—he makee lide—he allee gone!" he wailed, pointing to where, far to the west, a puff of dust-cloud was swiftly vanishing down into the valley of the Santa Clara.

CHAPTER XV.

Just about noon, when the hospital attendant was away at dinner, the doctor at Buxton's and Whittaker getting a nap after his night of vigil, only Hop Ling was on duty over Randy. "He'll probably sleep until late in the afternoon," the doctor said, when he looked in at eleven, and so perhaps he might have done. Grafton before starting had taken the responsibility of removing Florence's ominous looking missive and placing it with other letters on the mantel in the little parlor. He could not feel justified in hiding it entirely. He felt that when Merriam woke the truth would have to be told him, and perhaps Florence's own words might best explain her flight. At all events Dr. Leavitt had promised to be on hand to see that the news was not too abruptly broken, and Leavitt counted on a long sleep and upon subsequent drowsiness and languor

as the result of his treatment. No one had dreamed of the possibility of such rude awakening as came. No woman in her right senses would have ventured on the mad-brained, desperate measure resorted to by Mrs. McLane. What she hoped to learn, what she expected to gain, what papers or information she still believed him to possess, who can say? The power of reasoning, driven from her by the stupefying drug that of late had overmastered its weak and willing victim, seemed to have utterly gone, leaving in its place only something of the craft and cunning that possess the insane. No sooner was Mrs. Grafton out of the way than, rousing suddenly, Fanny had summoned Annette, had hastened through her toilet, and, barely sipping the coffee tendered her, had thrown a light wrap over her head and shoulders and flitted out of the house, out past the stable at the rear, and, to the amaze of the sentry on No. 2, had scurried away along the fence, had easily located the Merriams' gate, the number on which corresponded with that of their quarters, and in another moment had let herself through the kitchen and dining-room

and into the little parlor. There for a few moments she seemed to have paused and reconnoitred.

Of what followed only Randy and Hop Ling were witnesses. The latter was never able to explain it, if indeed he ever could understand the situation, and as for Randy it was long before he could be induced to speak of it at all. The time came when he had to, however, and it can be told now.

He was half asleep, half awake, in that helplessly lethargic state that seems to possess most temperaments after subjection to the influence of morphine. He was conscious of no pain, no soreness, conscious of nothing but that longing for the coming of Florence and a wondering as to the time of night or day. He remembered half opening his eyes and seeing Hop blinking in an easy-chair by the bedside, and then he noticed that it was in the spare room—the guest room—he was lying, and he thought it must be near dawn, for the shutters and shades were drawn, yet a dim light was shining through. He thought Florrie must be in her room, the front room, and he was just

thinking of calling to the servant and rousing him, when he heard the swift pit-a-pat of light footsteps in the hall, a swish of skirts, and, stretching out his arm, he called aloud, "Florence, darling!" and the next minute a woman's form was at his bedside and he started up, rubbing his eyes, amazed, startled, believing perhaps that he was still dreaming, for there, with trembling, outstretched hands, stood Fanny McLane.

"What—where is my wife?" he gasped. "I thought—why, surely this cannot be *you*!"

"It is I, Randy," she quavered. "I was in torment—I could not rest nor sleep. I knew you were alone, with no one to care for you."

"Alone!" he interrupted. "What do you mean? Where is Florence, my wife?"

"You don't mean—they haven't told you?" she answered. "She has gone—home to her people, it is supposed. She left two nights ago—that is one reason I am here."

But Merriam burst in upon her wailing, half incoherent words. "In God's name what do you mean? You or I must be mad. Here,

Hop, quick! Where are my clothes? Fetch them at once; then go for Captain Grafton."

"I'm not mad," she answered. "Read this—the letter she left for you," and the wretched woman tossed upon the bed the note she had taken from among the others on the mantel, and, shouting for a light, Merriam tore open the envelope, while the Chinaman, nerveless and obedient to the master's will, threw open the shutters.

In the next minute Randy had read the page, with staring, throbbing eyes, then fairly ordered her from the room and dazed, yet terrified at the effect of her announcement, she crept into Florence's room and threw herself into a chair, moaning and rocking to and fro. Like a madman Merriam was up and tearing about, issuing rapid orders to the servant, his lameness all forgotten, and Hop, awed and dismayed, dared disobey him in nothing. Quickly he dressed his master, pulling on light riding-breeches and leggings instead of the cavalry scouting-rig, and carefully drawing a hunting-shirt over the crippled arm that in its sling and bandages was now bound

close to the body. It seemed to take no time at all to get him dressed, yet Merriam fumed and raged, and then limped forth into the hall, bidding Hop go saddle Brown Dick at once.

At sound of his halting footsteps in the hall, she had once more roused herself to action, her own weight of care and trouble urging her on. "Randy," she cried, "for God's sake answer me! Are you sure—are you *sure*—was there no other statement? no other paper? Did he persist to the last that his mother was alive?"

"Mrs. McLane," was the answer, "you forced me to tell you the truth. I did all I could to keep it—and to keep myself from you, but you would have it."

"Oh, Randy, Randy!" she cried. "You are heartless! You are brutal, vindictive! You are punishing me because I so cruelly wronged you. But what did I ever do to you compared with what you have done to me? Oh, why, if you ever loved me, why could you not have destroyed that lying paper that is to rob me of my name, my rights, rob me of everything?"



"Don't hold them that you might triumph over my ruin."

"Hush!" he answered, leaning heavily against the balustrade. "I rode night and day. We sent the swiftest courier we had—to save your honor—to stop that marriage——"

"But you didn't stop it! You were too late!" she cried. "And when you saw it was too late, instead of burning those papers or giving them to me—you held them that you might triumph over my ruin. Then when you knew I was coming to beg for them, you were a coward, Randy—you sent them all to Ned Parry, that my own sister might gloat over my downfall."

"Mrs. McLane," he interrupted, "this is all unjust, all untrue. Ask Mr. Parry when he comes, as come he probably will. But this ends our meetings. God forbid that I should ever see you alone again! It has driven from me my wife—the wife I love and love devotedly—do you hear?—and I'm going now to find her."

And then he broke away. Out to the stable he staggered; love, pity, devotion urging him on and triumphing over the still numbing effect of the deadening drug whose languorous

spell he had never known before; and Brown Dick whinnied his welcome and impatience. and Hop Ling whimpered his "pidgin" protests, even as he was "cinching" on Merriam's field saddle with its well-stocked pouches. Randy fiercely ordered silence, bade the Chinaman give him a hand, and then, with blurred eyes and senses, with ears still drowsily ringing, he slowly climbed into saddle, hardly missing the customary grip of the left hand in the mane. Then out he rode into the sunshine, Brown Dick bounding with eagerness to search for and rejoin his stable mate; and then with every stride as he tore away over the mesa Randy felt the cobwebs brushing from his brain, and hope and determination spurring him on. "You have broken your word and gone to your old love," was the stern message of Florence's brief letter. "I will be no man's fool, no faithless husband's wife. You need not look for me nor follow, for I will never come to you again."

Another time pride, anger, and sense of wrong might have held his hand, but not now. And before that half-crazed, half-cringing wo-

man could give the alarm, Randy Merriam was riding fast and furious to join the pursuit, thinking only of her suffering and her sorrow, all ignorant, mercifully, of the new peril that involved his precious wife.

It was vain for Dr. Leavitt to heap imprecation on the head of that hapless Chinaman. Implicit obedience to the will of his master was the only creed Hop Ling observed. "Mellium say dless and catchum saddle and flask and lunch"—that was enough. "Mellium say lide an' catchum Misse Mellium," and Hop Ling wasn't fool enough to interfere.

But if Dr. Leavitt had lost one patient, Fate had provided him with another. He was needed at once at Grafton's, and, tarrying only long enough to report to Buxton the escape of Lieutenant Merriam, he hastened to the bedside of Mrs. McLane, now in sore need of medical attention.

Harriet Grafton has been heard to say that that afternoon and the night that followed made her ten years older, but her looks do not warrant the statement. Unquestionably she had a hard time, and might have had a

much harder but for the opportune arrival at the post, just before sundown, of the lately blockaded lawyer, Mr. Edward Parry, of Chicago.

Meantime, utterly broken down and cut off now, for the first time since her marriage, from the soothing and comfort of the perilous drug to the use of which she had become wedded almost from the hour that she met McLane, poor self-absorbed Fanny was pouring out her story and her secret in almost incoherent ravings to her hostess. Dr. Leavitt, who had suspected the cause of her vagaries before, was confident of it when he was called in to prescribe, and quickly found the dainty little case that Grafton had discovered the day before. It was hours before she could be even measurably quieted, and meantime what a tale of shame and woe had she not poured into Harriet's astonished ears?

Strained from its ravings and incoherencies and straightened out in chronological order, the story resolved itself into this: John Harold McLane was a Southern sympathizer as a young man, and went to California during the

war, provided with a liberal allowance and an opportunity of embarking in business. At Sacramento he fell into the clutches of a notorious household. "Old man Perkins" had three handsome daughters and a scheming wife. The mother's aim was to marry those girls to wealthy men, and she had succeeded as to two of them, and McLane fell a victim to the plot and was married to the third. A son, John H., Jr., was born to them in June, '67, and trouble of every kind followed. The sisters had quarrelled with their respective lords, one of whom had abandoned his wife and gone to Japan, while the other, even more desperate, had gone, self-directed, to his grave. McLane's home people refused to recognize any of the Perkins stock and cut off the young fellow's allowance. Old man Perkins, therefore, had three married daughters and one son-in-law on his hands, and pandemonium reigned within his gates. He had to order the eldest daughter out of the house, and she revenged herself by eloping with a man who deserted wife and children to run away with this magnificently handsome crea-

ture, a thing he mourned in sackcloth and ashes until, his money vanishing, she ran off with another victim and left him poor indeed, yet vastly better off than when he had her.

McLane's wife was the best of the three in disposition, but that was saying little, and when all his money was gone they fairly kicked him out of doors, and he, in desperation, drifted to Nevada and the mines, just in the days when colossal fortunes were being made by men who were wielding pick and shovel. At the very time old Perkins' people were trying to get a divorce, alleging desertion and failure to support, McLane loomed up at Virginia City as part owner of a lode that paid like the Comstock, and his Sacramento wife, who was believed to be deeply in love with a steamboat engineer, proved that she wasn't by journeying to Virginia City with her little boy and reclaiming her now prosperous husand. There they lived in style, and the Perkins household came to visit them and remained indefinitely, until the bickering drove McLane mad and he "skipped to 'Frisco," where every deal he made in the stock market



Randy Merriam.

went his way, and he became a millionaire before he was thirty. Again his pretty but low-bred wife followed, and again he honestly tried to make the best of his bargain; but her mad extravagance and the ceaseless incursions of mother- and sister-in-law were too much for him. One day there came a crash and much of his fortune was swept away. He had to break up his San Francisco home and go back to Virginia City, and a furious quarrel followed, in which he ordered the Perkinses never to darken his doors again, and lo! his wife sided with her sister and elected to go with them. McLane would gladly have parted with them all, but he had grown to love his boy. When once more, a year later, fortune smiled on him, and, with a new bank account, he came down to San Francisco, the Perkinses had disappeared. Two of the sisters were living the lives of adventuresses. Old Perkins was dead and buried, and no one knew where the rest had gone—a host of Sacramento tradesmen wished they could find out.

Then McLane came East, bringing his sheaves with him, and his family not unnatu-

rally forgave and welcomed him. Prosperity followed him. He fairly coined money, and Uncle Abe Mellen was only too glad to have him as a partner; and then after a lapse of years, when he thought her dead and honestly wished her so, his blissful bachelor life was broken in upon by the reappearance of his Sacramento wife, now a handsome woman of nearly forty, and a stalwart stripling whom he recognized at once as his long-lost son. For two years he provided for her and tried to educate the boy, but never again acknowledged her as his wife, and so long as she was amply paid and housed, lodged and cared for, she never protested. Mac's club friends sometimes winked and nudged each other when the tall young fellow appeared at the waiting-room with a letter, or when occasionally a dashing-looking woman patrolled the neighborhood until he would come out and join her. The boy was wild and wouldn't study, and was expelled from the schools at which he was entered by the name of Perkins, and the landlords complained of the people Mrs. Perkins received and entertained; then Mac put the young man

in Mellen's bank, and there he was when the Hayward nieces came back from Europe, and Charlotte married Ned Parry and Fan wished to marry Merriam. It was J. H. McLane, Jr., who did Uncle Abe's work for him and went around among Merriam's creditors and got them to unite in their complaint to the War Department; but by that time he had seen something of Randy, had "taken a shine to him," as he expressed it, and when he learned that Merriam had been banished to the frontier as a consequence he told the old man that he was done with that sort of dirty work, and was minded to go and confess to Miss Hayward what he had done. To buy him off Mellen gave him all the money he needed and bade him go and live the life he always longed to live, that of a prospector and miner in the Sierras. McLane, the father, was away and had been away for several months. Mrs. McLane, the mother, after a furious quarrel with her protector something over a year before, had agreed to return to California and never trouble him again upon payment of a big, round sum in cash. She would not listen

to a pension, and the story that came to the husband's ears soon after was that at last his Sacramento wife had rewarded the fidelity of her old friend, the steamboat engineer; but the lawyers sent to trace the matter were confronted by unlooked-for news—unwelcome news, and therefore news they fully investigated before reporting, since, if true, it would put an end to what promised to be a most profitable case. That twenty-five thousand dollars was practically wasted—Mrs. John H. McLane was dead.

They found her grave, headstone and all, but could get no trace of her long-devoted lover. It was surmised that he had taken what was left of the money and gone elsewhere in search of consolation. McLane came back to New York, met Fanny Hayward, fell in love, and Uncle Mellen urged the match in every way; and we know the result. There was a fortnight in which McLane seemed the happiest of men. Then came a shock. Fanny found him nearly crazed with trouble. A letter had come purporting to be from that supposed-to-be-dead woman demanding further

heavy payment as the price of her silence. McLane honestly told Fan the truth, and was astonished at her decision. She bade him "pay the money and have done with it."

They might have doubted the genuineness of her letter, but there was no doubting that of young McLane's dying statement, witnessed by the officers from Sedgwick. He declared his mother alive. And so one crime led to another. No sooner had they reached California than the whole Perkins family seemed resurrected, and blackmail was their business. The eldest sister demanded heavy hush-money, and it was paid. The second sister turned up with her husband and a preposterous demand. It was they who haunted him at the San Francisco club, and the man, drunk and triumphant, insolently demanding money that night, had fired that well-nigh fatal shot when repudiated, defied, and struck. The very next day at their hotel came a letter warning them to silence as to the identity of the assailants. So long as these latter were allowed to escape arrest

they would keep the secret, but if arrested and brought to trial they would proclaim McLane a bigamist. All this was made known to Uncle Mellen, and he, too, backed the niece's cause and kept up the deception. But no one could tell where the first wife was hidden. "She will be produced when needed, and her money must be paid through her sister." The money, a large sum, was paid, and then there was temporary peace. But McLane drooped and died under the weight of shame and anxiety. There was quarrelling between the widow and the guardian and further demands from those cormorants, who now openly threatened to claim the dead man's estate for the widow and her son—they, at least, knew nothing of the latter's death; and then Fanny, coming to Sedgwick, tried to reassert her old sovereignty over Merriam and to gain possession of the papers of which her husband had told her and which Randy had long since sent to Parry, but concerning which she had never spoken to her brother-in-law, believing him to be ignorant of their existence; and it pleased Ned Parry to let

her live on in ignorance that he had them. He took a curious interest in making a study of her, and had, without consulting his client, a more than professional interest in the case.

But now Bullock, the man who shot McLane, had been traced to and arrested in Chicago, together with his dashing helpmeet. Uncle Mellen had been prostrated by paralysis as a result of the news. The secret could be no longer kept, and Fanny McLane, hunted, desperate, self-deluded, and self-drugged, believed herself a ruined woman when at last Ned Parry came.

Too ill to see him, she seemed at least relieved to know he had come, and that night in Grafton's parlor he sat gravely listening to Harriet's recital of what Fanny had detailed to her, making no comment but taking it all in, when, just at tattoo, a trooper dismounted at the gate and bore to Mrs. Grafton a brief missive from her husband. It was written that morning nearly twenty miles northwest of José's ranch.

"You must prepare Merriam for the worst."

it said. "There is reason to believe poor Florence has fallen into the hands of a little band of Apaches. The sign is unmistakable and we are just starting in pursuit."



*clung reverentially back as though waiting permission to venture into
the presence of a queen.*

CHAPTER XVI.

LATE that anxious night one battalion of the Riflers returned to Sedgwick, Hayne's company one of the four, and very grave he looked when told of the events of the past forty-eight hours. Acting on the report of Captain Grafton that Apache sign had been found in the foothills north of José's, Buxton had ordered another troop to march to reinforce him, and this troop Hayne obtained permission to accompany. It marched at dawn, so he had barely three hours in which to prepare. Mr. Parry, wearied with his journeying and many cares, had been escorted to Merriam's vacated quarters by Whittaker some little time before midnight, and there he was made welcome by Hop Ling and given the room abandoned by the master of the house so short a time before. Many people, between anxiety as to the fate of their beloved

Florence and their eagerness to receive the Riflers on their return, sat up until two o'clock; but Parry, though filled with anxiety as keen, was well aware that nothing was to be gained by his spending a wakeful night and listening to all manner of theory as to the cause of the fair fugitive's sudden deflection from the road to the ranch. Hayne, therefore, did not meet nor see him, but, as soon as it was light, rode forth ahead of the troop, meaning to go first to José's, see his wife and Dr. Gould, and then strike out northward, confident of meeting the second troop somewhere in the open country that there spread for miles before him.

Buxton had sent a party on the trail of Merriam within an hour of his dash and with orders to bring him back to the post, but they had not been heard from since their start, "and," said Whittaker, "they're not likely to be. Those fellows barely ride one mile to Randy's two. It's my belief he will just pull up at José's and then go straight on to the foothills, as probably she did."

But Randy was having a ride the like of

which was not recorded in the annals of Fort Sedgwick since the days when, long before the war, the First Dragoons and the Navajos battled for the mastership of the Santa Clara. Ignorant as yet of the report of Apaches in the foothills of the Mescalero, his one theory was that she had gone to José's, intending from there to push on to the cantonment. The thought of her daring so long and so hard a ride at a time when she should be guarded with the utmost care was in itself a source of dire distress to him, and he could hardly have speeded faster and with grimmer determination to defy all pain or weariness had he dreamed of the deadly perils that lurked about her path. Of the fact that Valdez and his few followers had eventually fled northward and across the road to the Cata-mount he had heard nothing. Through Hop Ling's chatter he had gathered that Grafton and his men were gone in search of Florence and that Mrs. Hayne and Dr. Gould were at José's. He dare not stop to make inquiries at the garrison. He was under medical care—therefore under doctor's orders, and

on complaint of the acting surgeon it would be perfectly competent for Buxton to place him in close arrest. His one idea, therefore, was to put as much ground as possible between the post and himself. He knew he could get another horse at José's, so Brown Dick was never spared an instant. At three o'clock, galloping free, the gallant horse was stretching away northwestward over the low, rolling earth-waves that seemed to spread to the very lap of the Mescalero, spanning the horizon toward the setting sun. Far behind him, the scattered ranches and the sparse green foliage of the Santa Clara. Far away on either hand, the lumpy, sandy barren, dotted everywhere with little dull-hued tufts of coarse herbage or stunted sage. Ahead of him the tortuous, twisting, dusty trail, dented with scores of hoof-prints, the tracks of Grafton's troop on its way to the rescue. By this time Randy was burning with thirst, but the water in his canteen was warm and nauseating. He raised the felt-covered flask to his lips from time to time and rinsed his mouth and moistened his parching throat, but that

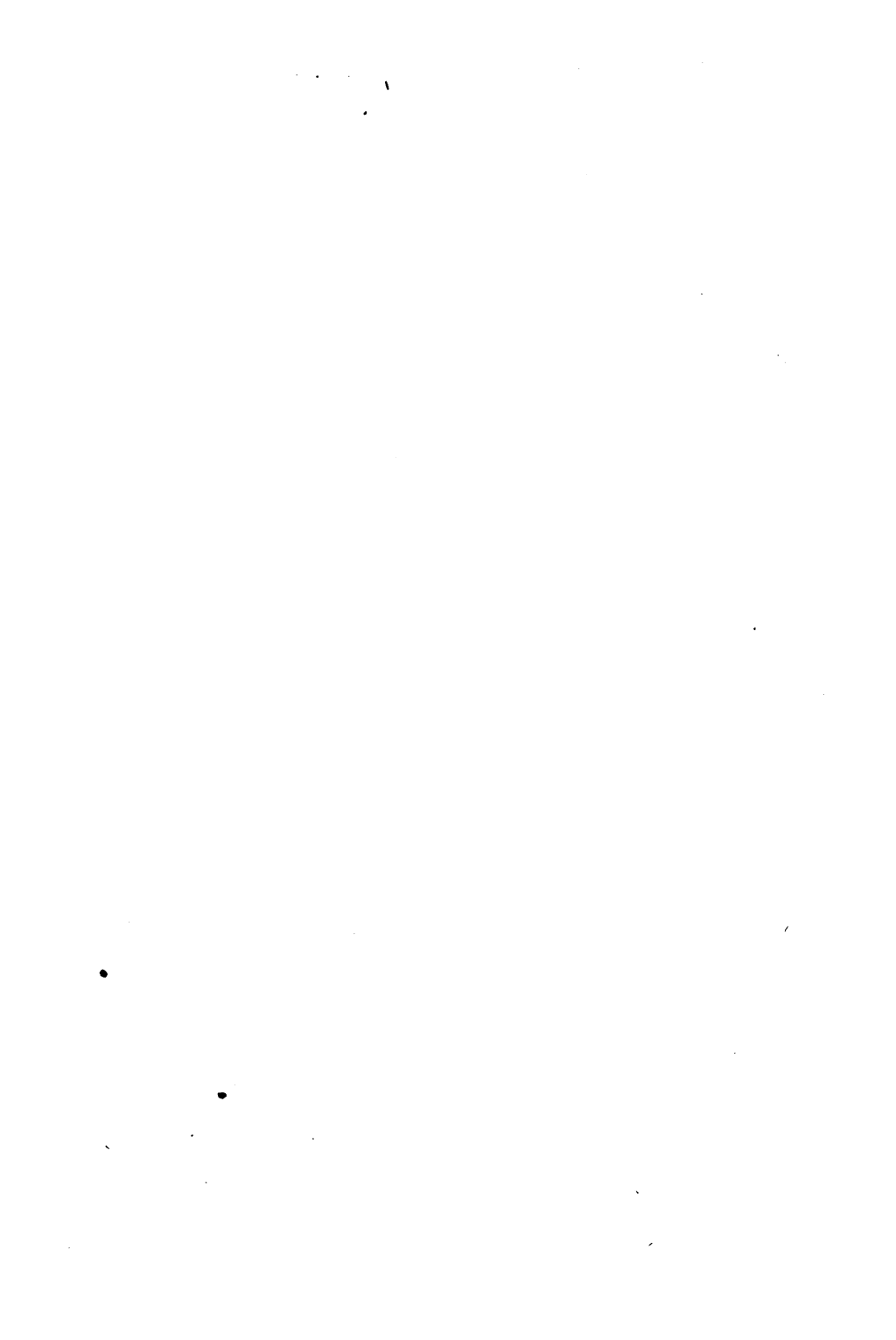
did not allay the craving. He had still thirty miles to go before he could reach José's and exchange Brown Dick for a broncho, and have Dr. Gould renew the dressing of his wounded arm. He knew that Florence had failed to appear there, but he knew her pluck and spirit, and believed he knew the reason—that there might be sojourners there either from the Catamount or from the post who would seek to turn her back or hold her there; and he knew that in her overwrought, half-maddened state she was starving for her mother's petting and her father's arms. He knew her so well that any attempt to dissuade her now would result, he felt assured, only in frantic outburst and more determined effort to push ahead.

Then he had another and even better reason for thinking he could quickly find Mignon's trail, although it might be miles to the north of José's. On their return from their latest visit to the Catamount they were having a glorious run with the hounds one lovely November morning and the jack-rabbits led them far out to the north of the road among

the buttes and bowlders that clustered about the course of a little stream, barely a yard wide anywhere, that rippled out from among the foothills only to be lost in the sands of the desert to the east. One vigorous old rabbit, close followed by the hounds, had tacked suddenly and darted up this narrow valley, and Floy and Mignon, all excitement, darted after him, while Randy, guiding Brown Dick behind, watched with fond, proud eyes his young wife's graceful, fearless riding. Far up toward the head of the brook poor jack had been tossed in air by the pointed muzzle of his closest pursuer and then pounced upon by the panting hounds, and Randy found that they were in a little amphitheatre among the buttes—found the little spring in which the streamlet had its birth, and there they dismounted and unsaddled and let the horses roll; and here they took their luncheon, and had a happy, loving hour, all alone with the horses and hounds in this little world of their own; and Floy had named the spot—a fond, foolish little caprice, perhaps, and vowed that it was to be her refuge by-and-by. “This is



"Florence - Sweetheart."



where I am coming to build my lonely cloister one of these days, when you grow weary of me, sir," she had laughingly said. And now, as he plied spurs to Dick's heaving sides, Randy wondered, wondered whether it might not be that she had made that wide *détour* around José's purposely to find and revisit that romantic little nook and there pour out her grief to the solitude of the silent foothills.

At five o'clock Brown Dick was black with sweat and dust and streaked with foam, but still pressed gamely on, and Randy, with white, set face, in which deep lines of pain and weariness were graving, gazed fixedly ahead with burning, fevered eyes, conscious that strength was failing him and praying for the first sight of those dun adobe walls of José's sheltering ranch.

Just at seven o'clock of the early winter's evening the denizens of José's heard the thud of horse's hoofs at the gate and the hail of a feeble voice. José's wife at that moment was in half-tearful talk with Mrs. Hayne, who from dawn till dark had been on watch—hop-

ing against hope for tidings of Florence, and who now, wearied with long vigil and well-nigh worn out with anxiety, was lying down in search of sleep. Gould, veteran soldier and surgeon that he was, could no longer bear the suspense and inaction at the ranch. He had borrowed one of José's horses, and, with a half-breed Mexican for guide, had ridden away at dawn, hoping to strike Grafton's trail and follow him into the mountains, whither he was supposed to have ridden in pursuit of the Apaches. Gould was a skeptic. He said he didn't believe a dozen Apaches were off their reservation. He didn't believe half a dozen had ventured over the New Mexican line, and if any had he was willing to bet a month's pay they were not hostile. This was comforting to Mrs. Hayne, but José's people were not so easily cured of their conviction. By the time the rumor reached the ranch, brought in by stampeded herdsmen, no one of whom had seen an Indian but each of whom could tell tremendous tales of their doings in the valley, it was declared that at least fifty of Victorio's old band were raiding the

.

Santa Clara and might be expected to assault José's at any moment. The corral was filled, therefore, with scraggy cow ponies and swarthy men, and the sight of an officer, one-armed, pallid, exhausted, reeling earthward from an equally exhausted steed, was all that was necessary to complete the panic. Over half the Mexicans present made a mad rush for the subterranean refuge known as the "dug-out," and but for a couple of troopers who had put into José's with lamed and useless horses Randy would have gone headlong to the ground. They caught him just in time, and bore him inside the ranch, where the sight of his death-like face drove José almost frantic. But the troopers knew what to do for their officer and speedily brought him round, and when he asked for Dr. Gould they told him of his going, and Randy's next demand was for coffee and a fresh horse.

And while he was sipping the coffee and resting on a bunk in the main room, Mrs. Hayne came hastening in with outstretched hands and eyes still dim with weeping. She was shocked at his haggard appearance. She

could only press his hand in silent sympathy and struggle hard to beat back the tears that would have flowed afresh. "You will stay here with us now until Dr. Gould returns," she said. "I look for him any moment."

"I? No, indeed. I go on at once, as soon as they can saddle a fresh horse for me. She must be more than half-way to the cantonment by this time, if Mignon hasn't given out."

And then Mrs. Hayne sobbed aloud. "Oh, Randy, Randy! Haven't you heard? Floy never regained the road at all. The mail carrier from Catamount got in an hour ago and saw nothing whatever of her."

"Then I know where to find her," said Randy promptly. "A lovely spot we visited together hardly a month ago, and I could find it easily after moonrise."

But Mrs. Hayne only sobbed the more. How could she tell him? Yet it had to be.

"God grant it," she cried. "God grant it! But, oh, my friend, we've had a dreadful fright! Captain Grafton's men struck an Apache trail yesterday, and they are following it fast as they can go at this moment."

And with that announcement vanished all thought of further rest for him. Bidding the two troopers saddle anything on four legs that could carry them, he sprang forth into the still and radiant night and was astride his mongrel mount in a twinkling. In vain Mrs. Hayne came out and pleaded with him; Merriam would listen to nothing—nothing but tidings of Florence. It was barely eight o'clock when, fully armed, the little party rode swiftly away under the northward stars, following an old trail that led to the upper foothills of the Mescalero. They were not half an hour gone when a sergeant and two men rode in from the west, inquiring for Dr. Gould and Mrs. Hayne. They were three of Grafton's men sent back from the chase to say they were hot on the trail. There were five Apaches afoot and one shod horse—so the traces told infallibly. Florence, then, was probably bound a prisoner on that horse, and Grafton would recapture her or lose every horse and man in the attempt.

And if that night was one of dread and dejection at the ranch, what must it have been

to Merriam, reeling and well-nigh exhausted, yet riding grimly, desperately forward through the long hours, searching vainly, vainly under the wan moonlight, even along into the pallid dawn, for that little cleft in the foothills Floy had named "Mon Abri." Faint and shimmering the day-beams came at last, and then, and not until then, Murdock, a faithful trooper, now riding by his lieutenant's side and supporting him with his arm, turned to his comrade, who, dismounted, was striving with the aid of a match or two to study some hoof-prints they had found in the soft surface. "Jimmy," he whispered, "there's something moving along that ridge yonder—coming this way. What is it?"

And though soft the whisper it caught poor Randy's drowsy ear, and he strove to straighten up in saddle. "What? Where?" he faintly asked.

"Yonder, sir, not half a mile away. It's some of our fellows, or I'm a duffer. Yell to 'em, Jimmy."

And obedient to the word Jimmy yelled. Over the rolling surface the soldier's voice

went ringing through the dawn, and echo sent it clattering back from the buttes and bowlders to the west. "This way, you fellows!—this way!" he cried, and then, mounting, clapped spurs to his pony and sputtered away down the intervening swale.

Ten minutes later Randy Merriam was lying on the ground in a swoon, and George Grafton, with grave, sad face, well-nigh as haggard as the lieutenant's, was bending over him and striving to force some brandy down his throat. Following "for all they were worth" the Apache trail, they had overhauled the supposed marauders not twenty miles back in the foothills—a pacific hunting-party, provided with the agency pass and safeguard, and culpable only in that they had come too far and had picked up on the plains an American horse, abandoned at sight of them by some Mexicans, who galloped far away; and that American horse, minus saddle and bridle, was Floy's pretty bay mare, Mignon.

Then where in heaven's name was she?

It was some minutes before Merriam revived. Then he strove to stagger to his feet,

but fell helplessly back. It was nearly broad daylight, but the sun was still below the distant Guadaloupe. Gathering his feeble energies, Randy strove to describe the little cove and to implore Grafton to bear him thither, and was interrupted by an eager sergeant, who said: "We passed just such a brook, sir, not a mile back. Shall I take half-a-dozen men and follow it up?"

"Yes, at once," said Grafton, "and I'll go, too. Stay here, Randy." Indeed, the caution was not needed, for Merriam was past moving now, poor fellow, and his head sank helplessly back upon the soldier's supporting arm. And then they rode away, Grafton and half-a-dozen of his men, with Mignon, leg weary and reluctant, trailing behind. And meantime the troop dismounted and set about making coffee, while one orderly rode back on the trail to summon Dr. Gould, jogging wearily a mile behind. And presently the doctor came and knelt by Randy's side and scolded through his set teeth, even while he skilfully stripped away the hunting-shirt and so reached the shattered arm.

Then came the glorious sunshine streaming over the Guadalupe and gilding the westward Mescalero, and then far out among the buttes, one—two—three, at regular intervals, the ringing, echoing signals of the cavalry carbine; and rough-garbed troopers sprang to their feet and shouted loud, and clapped ball cartridge into the brown bellies of their guns, and fired unlicensed salvos into the air, and danced and swung their hats, and drew coarse flannel shirt-sleeves across their blinking eyes—all at Sergeant Hogan's jubilant cry, "My God, boys, they've found her!"

Found her they had, indeed, curled up like a child, wrapped in her own pet Navajo blanket, sleeping the sleep of utter exhaustion, and waking only to burst into tears of relief and joy at sight of Grafton's radiant yet haggard face; then roused to instant action by the tidings he bore and gently, but reproachfully, told her—that, though sorely wounded and well-nigh exhausted, it was Randy who guided the rescuers to her, and who now lay prostrate and unconscious barely a mile away. Then she could hardly wait for them to saddle Mig-

not—could hardly urge her laboring favorite fast enough to match her mad impatience. It was a sight to move a heart of flint to see her, as with streaming eyes and convulsive sobs she threw herself from her saddle, and, reckless of them all, knelt and gathered Randy's unconscious head to her bosom, cooing over him, crying over him, praying over him, begging for one word of love and pardon, then showering tears and kisses on his pallid lips. There was no crime of which the poor child did not accuse herself, for on their hurried way Grafton gravely told her of Randy's utter innocence and of his own culpability. Not until the radiant sun was nearly an hour high did their patient seem to respond to stimulant or caress; but at last, to her wild joy, he opened his eyes a little moment, looked up in her face, whispered, "Florence,—sweetheart," and then seemed to drop away into resistless slumber.

"A pretty time we had," said Gould, "getting that pair of spoons back to José's!" It was an all-day's job, between waiting for the ambulance and then finding an easy road for

it. But there at José's were "the spoons" condemned to stay four days and nights, at least, while the rest of Sedgwick's scouting parties drifted back to the post, and there presumably Florence made her peace with her lover lord, and wept gallons of salt tears as she told him how wicked—wicked—wicked she had been, and how penitent she was and how severely punished, though never so severely as she deserved. She would listen to no condoning words of Mrs. Hayne. She flung herself into her father's arms when, white-faced and ten years aged, he reached her at the ranch, and told him what a fiend she had been and what an angel Randy—a statement the captain could not entirely indorse, for he went back to the cantonment at the end of the week confident still that there must have been something in Randy's conduct to undermine the faith of such an unusual girl as his Brownie. But he did not say so—it would have done no good.

And her story was very simple. Nearing the ranch early in the first afternoon, she saw a party of horsemen riding in toward it, and

in her half-crazed state she believed them troops from the post—Randy's men. So she turned square to the north and rode for the foothills. She had a little store of provisions and some wine in the large saddle-pouch, and only then discovered that her bag was gone. She could ride away round the ranch, find "Mon Abri," and hide there during the night. She had her Navajo blanket. Mignon would have grass and water. What more could army girl ask in that warm and rainless region? Before sunset she had found the romantic little spot, unsaddled and picketed Mignon, and later moved her farther down stream for fresh grass, and then, wearied, she herself slept for hours; and when she awoke and would have pushed on to the cantonment, lo! Mignon was gone. Florence had heard no sound. She could not account for it. She could only sit and brood and think, and then, as the long, long day—the second day—drew to its close, pray heaven for Randy's coming. There, more surely than anywhere else, if he loved her, his love would lead him.

What days of jubilee there were at Sedg.

wick when at last Randy was convalescent enough to be moved, and the ambulance brought him back through the same old hole in the fence, Florence seated by his side. Another patient was out on a piazza farther down the row, taking the sweet fresh air and listening languidly to the purring of Minturn, who still worshipped at the shrine deserted by Whittaker. Undeniably sallow looked the Widow McLane, and her eyes gazed but languidly at the joyous little *cortège* entering the westward end of the road. Captain and Mrs. Grafton, the Haynes, and other sympathizing friends had flocked thither to welcome the fugitives, and so it happened that there was no one at home but Mrs. McLane and a much perturbed young battery officer to greet two somewhat dusty civilians, who had just driven out from the Junction, and now slowly ascended the Graftons' steps. One—Mr. Parry—came jauntily forward. The other—a mutton-chop whiskered, plethoric-looking party—hung reverentially back, as though waiting permission to venture into the presence of a queen. With swift, anxious, imploring

glance the invalid searched the impassive features of her exasperating brother-in-law and read no hope; but even from the depth of her despond sprang something of her old-time coquetry as she languidly lay back in the easy-chair and extended a slender, bejewelled hand to the adoring Swinburne. The batteryman bowed stiffly and pulled at his mustache in recognition of this new arrival, and Ned Parry almost audibly chuckled his enjoyment of the situation. Then stable call sounded and drew the warrior away and left the field in the hands of the civilian, and then Parry decided he must "join the gang" at Merriam's; and there presently he was patting Randy on the back and showing symptoms of a desire to kiss Mrs. Randy's hand, as he did Mrs. Grafton's. Mrs. Grafton hurried out, declaring she must go and order more dinner, whereat Parry followed her to the gate and called a halt. She saw the twinkle in his eyes and stopped.

"You've brought her good news, I know," said she, with womanly eagerness.

"More than that," said Parry, with a comi-

cal grin. "More than Fan deserves by a good deal—I've brought the fellow that brings her the news. Never mind dinner—give him ten minutes."

"Oh, *how* did you get at the truth?"

"I didn't—I couldn't. They were shy of me as though I'd been a Pinkerton. I knew Swinburne was sore-smitten. I knew he'd blow in his whole bank account if need be. I told him the story and my suspicions, and set him to work. He found the engineer and got the proofs. She owes her deliverance to him."

"Then it was as you thought—as you told Captain Grafton?"

"Certainly. Mrs. McLane No. 1 died two months after she got her twenty-five thousand dollars, but the family couldn't afford to lose so fruitful a member. They had read and written each others' letters from childhood. Either surviving sister could write just as well as the youngest. They planned the game; they fooled McLane completely, and they as completely deceived poor young Jack, the only reputable connection they had. Fan's

all right now, thanks to Swinburne. Let him be happy for ten minutes—she'll make him miserable the rest of his life. Let's go back and look at a picture of absolute bliss—Floy Merriam's face. Isn't she an ideal army wife?"

THE END.

